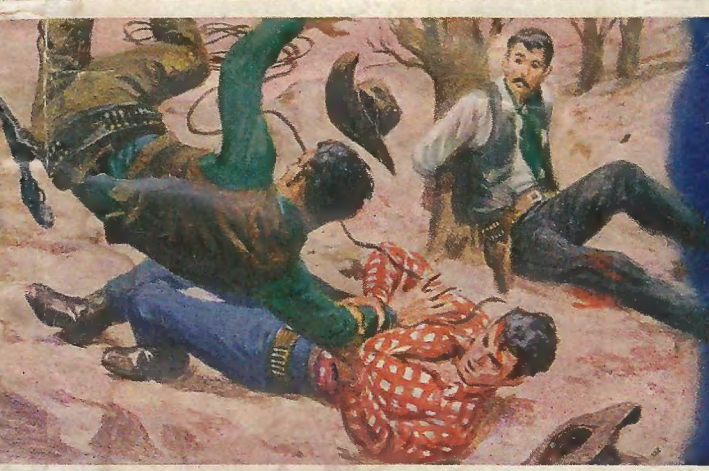
FA

TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAG

Memory Of A Girl Haunted Him

TOO TOUGH TO KILL
by Art Baker



His Only Cure . . . Bullets

GUN DOCTOR
by J. M. Decker

They Rode The Dark Trails

PEACH MEADOW CANYON
by Jim Mayo

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THREE WESTERN ACTION NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 17, NO. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FALL, 1956

TOO TOUGH TO KILL

There was a girl he couldn't forget, so he came back, tougher now, faster with a gun—and dared them to try and kill him

ART BAKER 8

GUN DOCTOR

He bore the stamp of the gunman, and his neighbors wanted no part of him—till they needed the deadly magic of his guns

J. M. DECKER 36

THE TRAIL TO PEACH MEADOW CANYON

Young Mike Bastian knew the outlaw boss would never let him quit and live to tell of it—not even for his own daughter

JIM MAYO 60

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor

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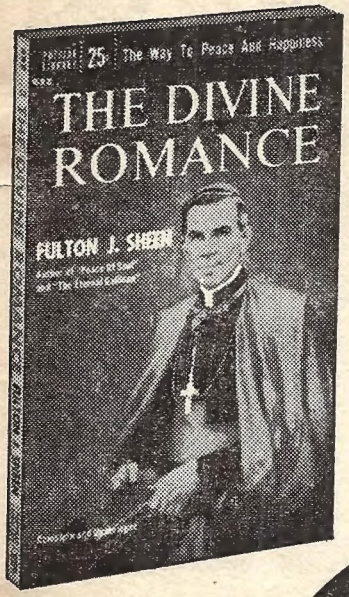

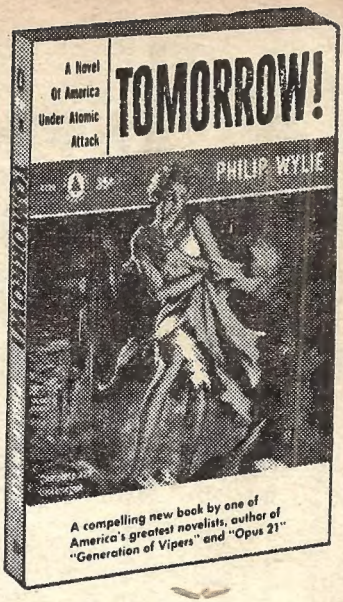

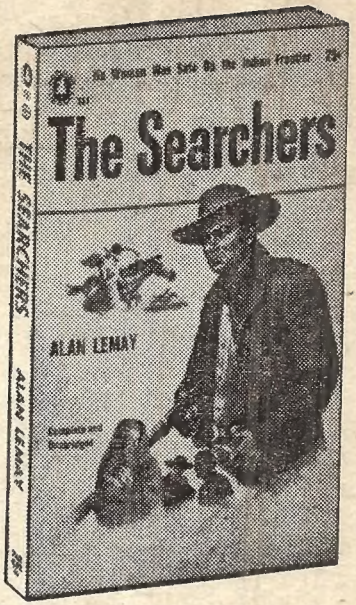

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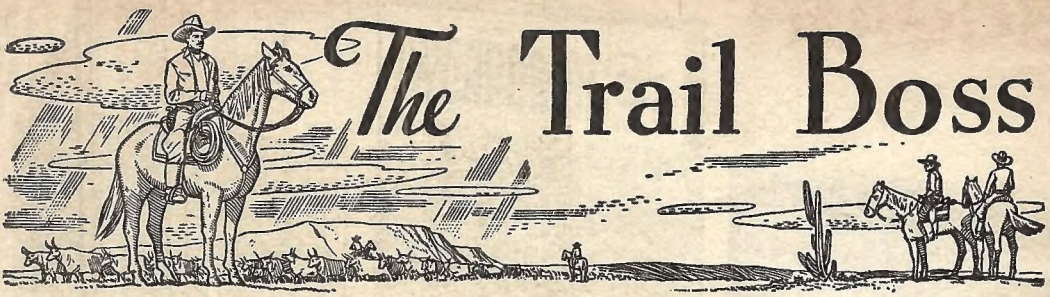


GIRLS OF THE GOLDEN WEST

By Homer Hathaway

THE "line" was a part of every Western town. No matter how it was condemned by the good matrons or the somewhat less-than-manly men, it flourished. The "girls of the "line" became as famous, in their way, as the outlaws and the marshals.

The streets were famous—Denver's Holladay Street, Leadville's State, Reno's Stockade, Cripple Creek's Myers, Butte's Galena. This was the area where the glamorous ladies of easy virtue lived, sometimes in pretentious mansions, but more often in clapboard cribs, well marked by brilliant red lights. In Denver at one time a huge sign was used that left no room for doubt—MEN TAKEN IN AND DONE FOR!

The line was well populated. Butte at one time boasted more than 1,000 girls between 1904-1917. Other towns were seldom underpopulated. And the line always had a leader, one of the most famous and revered of which was Julia Bulette, the legend of Virginia City.

The Queen Bee

Julia, like her contemporaries, was no hypocrite. She knew men's needs, and made it her business to see to it they were fulfilled. But she had a heart as full as her pocketbook. Poor families received food from her, ragged kids were given good clothes. When a man died in the Comstock mines, the widow received food and money first from Julia.

Much folklore has grown up around Julia, most of it untrue. According to the most reliable authority, she was born in London, came to the states by way of New Orleans in 1853, and wound up in Virginia City in 1863. From the moment of her arrival, she dominated the social life of the Comstock town.

She lived alone, entertained sumptuously at her big home, and drove her own lacquered carriage. Her trademark was four aces, prominently painted on the doors of the carriage. Her parties, while serving an ultimate purpose, were also models of social decorum, where guests were treated to good conversation, fine wines and exceptional dinners on a lavish scale.

When other women fled from early Indian attacks on Virginia City, Julia remained to nurse the wounded. She was an honorary member of Engine Company No. 1, and no fire was official until she had arrived to serve coffee and food to the volunteers.

A Violent Death

Julia was murdered on January 20, 1867, not for sex, but for money. As Julia's funeral procession wound through the streets, the "respectable" women of the town pulled the curtains so as not to see their husbands in the line of mourners. These same women attended to every need of the murderer, John Millain, after he was caught and awaited trial for the murder. He was tried and found guilty, much to his own and the matrons' discomfort.

John Millain was buried in the same cemetery on Flowery Hill as Julia, but nobody todays knows the location of his grave. Julia's grave, however, can easily be located by its carefully tended white picket fence. As in life, so in death does this lady of the line still retain the respect and honor of the city which called her their own.

BOGART TALKS TURKEY!

Humphrey Bogart, Hollywood's famous "tough guy," sounds off on:

Whiskey:

("I don't trust anyone who doesn't drink!")

Wedding Bells:

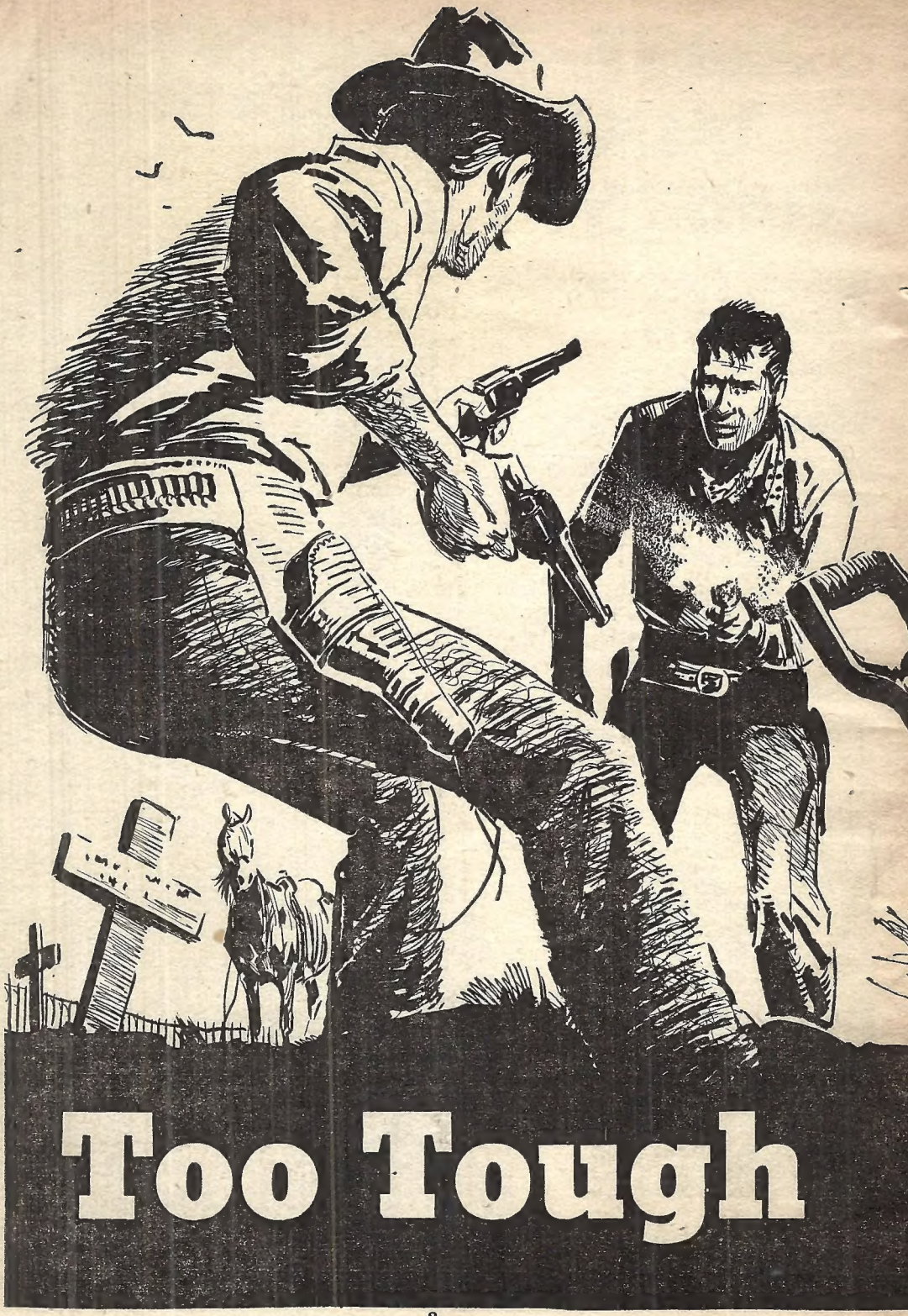
("I had 4 very happy marriages. I liked them all!")

Work:

("Save your money and tell 'em to go to ----!")

60 P

Read it in the current issue of SEE Magazine On Sale At All Newsstands. 15c.



Too Tough

There was a girl he couldn't forget, so he came back, tougher now, faster with a gun—and practically dared them to try and kill him

To Kill

by ART BAKER

I

LOGAN BITT dropped the little home-made file to the table and assembled the pieces of his new Colt revolver. He touched the trigger and smiled at the quick smack of the hammer.

"A man's got to know how to draw one of these," he commented, "or he'd shoot his blamed leg off."

"You're not a man! You're twenty-three, Logan, but you're no more a man now than you were when you left here six years ago."

"Eight years. I remember. I was fifteen."

"And there is still not a touch of good in your whole wicked soul!"

Logan looked up, his smile a thing of charm, for he had inherited his mother's dark Irish comeliness. "That's no way for a father to be talking to his son," he admonished. "Besides—" he rose to his feet—"Jeremy Bitt, I'm more of a man at twenty-three than you are at fifty—or is it sixty? How old *are* you, Pop?" Logan slid the revolver into the holster on his left thigh and hefted both guns a few times to make sure they lifted smoothly and didn't wedge in the hard leather at any spot.

"A man's not measured by the distance between his boots and his hat!" Jeremy argued. "It's what he's got inside him that counts."

Logan jabbed a thumb into his father's paunch. "Nothing but booze in there, old man. That's all you ever had in there."

Jeremy Bitt looked up at his tall son, then his small, veined face twisted and he turned quickly away. "Don't say that, Logan! I've been good to you!" He brought his hands up to his temples and pressed at his head. "Lord knows I've had my troubles, your mother dying so young and me with two wild gossoons to raise and care for! I've never known a minute's peace since she left me. Not a minute! Alden turned against me, and now you! Who can blame a man for taking a drink?"

"I know about your troubles, old man. Haven't I made half a dozen trips back here to get you out of those troubles? That's why I'm here now, and you know I'll always come when you need me. Only maybe this time you're going to be sorry you sent for me."

JEREMY jerked around, his eyes suddenly wary and apprehensive. "You wouldn't *gun* him, Logan! You couldn't do that! Why, I—I can still see the two of you high up on old Gater setting off for town together." His hands lifted as though to pat the legs of the small boys he visioned in memory. "You were always together, good or bad, straining on the pump handle, running wild down the river road with your fish poles when I needed chores done. But most of all, I remember both of you up on old Gater, one clinging to the other, and Alden with his hand on the money in his pocket, him as the oldest, being trusted with it."

"Heading for town to buy you another gallon of liquor," observed Logan. "That's why you remember it best of all, old man. I remember some other things about Alden and you. I remember the bull whip he used when he drove me away from home, and you doing nothing about it but crying like an old woman!"

"You were bad, Logan! You messed with that Marla girl, and made her bad. I didn't want Alden to use a bull whip on you Logan, *believe* me! But the Tamarack riders were coming. They'd have lynched us all if they'd found you here! They had orders to take me back to Tamarack to face the Colonel. I've found out that's all they knew about it. Alden was protecting one of his fancy friends. He didn't *want* me to talk to the old goat." "They'd have lynched you if you'd been here, Logan. The Colonel had raised Marla like she was his own girl. He'd have strung you up sure as I'm standing here!"

Logan grinned. "I've been back several times since," he reminded, "walking free through the streets of Hornbow. Nobody's mentioned a lynching."

Jeremy glanced down at Logan's low-slung guns. "No. Not any more. You've grown into something they're all scared of. But you can't gun your own brother, no matter what he's done! I'd rather lose the whole place than see you do that!"

"It's not *all* your place to lose, old man. Remember?" Logan picked his hat off the wall peg. "It makes my lonesome life a lot easier, knowing I've got this fine piece of land to settle down on some day. A man put a little muscle to it, this spread would be the finest in the territory—better'n the Tamarack. And I'm not giving up one foot of it to Alden and his fine friends." He glanced at his father, and his face softened into a quick smile. "I'll bring you a bottle from town, Pop."

Logan walked his chestnut mare down the Hornbow road. He was continually surprised that so little had changed here since he was a boy. The alder brush and live oaks along Coffee Creek had grown thick and tall. The old log bridge had been reinforced with sawed pilings and a pole hand-rail, but in general it was the same narrow dirt road along which he'd run barefoot, with Alden riding old Gater and refusing to take turns as they'd been instructed. Alden had always taken the best of things.

Logan pulled up at the crossing which led to the Tamarack, and gazed along the cross road winding into the hazy brown hills. He felt a warm quiver at the pit of his stomach that passed quickly. Just beyond the brown hills the Tamarack buildings stood in a basin amidst well-kept gardens and imported shade

trees. Colonel Moreau's spread was some larger than the Broken Bit, but the Broken Bit was in the best water in the neighborhood —in fact, eighty per cent of the water supply of the whole vicinity was well within its boundaries. Colonel Moreau had always been welcome to run his stock across the line during the late summer when his own creeks dried up; at least he had been welcome to do so before the trouble. That was when Logan always had met Anise Moreau, and later, Marla, there at the big bend of the Candy River. Memory of his many subsequent trips to the Tamarack brought that warm quiver to the pit of his stomach, but the memory of his own brother's bull whip made the pleasant sensation die quickly.

ONCE across the Tamarack road, Logan was off Broken Bit land. He would be a stranger to most of the people in town, and those who had known him when he was fifteen would be slow to recognize him now, eight years older. Unless he accidentally ran into one of the few he'd seen on his more recent visits home, there would be time to measure his job before he showed his hand.

Hornbow town seemed to snuggle under the high blue-black wall of stone which was the Mansino Mountain range, but Logan knew it was half a day's ride to the foothills. To the east, the land rolled like a galloping carpet into the vast Painted Plains. As a boy he'd thought a man could ride out there to the edge of the world, and never meet another living soul, except maybe a war party of damned Commanches.

Riding into the shade under the live oaks that greeted visitors approaching from either end of Custer Street, Logan felt nostalgia return. He could remember when Hornbow was little more than a stage depot with a general store and saloon under one roof. With the creation of the Mansino Indian Reservation, and the building of Fort Colver, Hornbow had grown overnight into a prosperous community. The Indians needed beef, and the troopers needed supplies and recreation. Many of the soldiers settled their families in town. Houses mushroomed and streets were worn into the hard-packed earth, to be named Highland, Grant and Huston, running parallel with Custer—Number One through eight streets crossing it. The old general store was replaced by a brick building which had become the bank, and for two blocks each way from Fifth and Custer, brick store fronts had gone up, one after the other.

Shortly before Logan had left home, the reservation had been moved two hundred miles northeast to meet the railroad which was driving its line past the town of Bison. The fort was abandoned and the troops dispersed to other military installations. As it had grown overnight, so Hornbow shrunk, and from what he had heard Logan fully expected to see the shambles of deserted buildings surrounding the heart of the town. He was somewhat disconcerted as he rode past well-kept homes on the outskirts, and saw people moving along under the arcades that shaded store fronts where open doors and full display windows indicated a return to bustling, if not booming, prosperity.

Logan went into Penny's bar at Fourth and Custer. Two card tables against a side wall were busy under hanging lights, and a dozen or so men were grouped at the bar. But upon Logan's entrance it became so quiet he could hear the flies droning lazily above the thick beams overhead, and the drip from the water pump behind the bar. The doors clacked behind him as somebody hurried outside, and before the bartender had poured his second drink, a heavy-set man with a drooping brown mustache and a star pinned on his shirt was moving in at Logan's elbow.

"You appear a mite overdressed for this climate, young feller," he observed.

Logan finished his drink and stared at the man. "I've known it to get cold, suddenlike," he said.

The lawman shook his head. "Not here in Hornbow. Folks make a practice of checking their hardware with me when they ride in."

"I didn't see any law posted."

"It's not a law. Just a good neighborly custom."

"I'm glad to hear that, Marshal. I'd hate to break any laws here." Logan turned his shoulder and nodded to the bartender.

Anger clouded the marshal's eyes. "We've

got a good town here, mister. I don't know who you are or what your business is, but unless you've got a legitimate reason for being here, you'd best wash your thirst down fast and keep moving."

LOGAN had picked up his drink. He set it down slowly and spoke in a low voice that held no touch of humor. "Marshal, don't try rawhiding me out of Hornbow. Don't even make noises like you was going to try!"

The marshal was taken aback by this sudden shift of attiude. There was no particle of bluff about the young gunslinger.

"I made a suggestion, that's all," he said. "You've broken no law, as yet." He stared at Logan, as though trying to remember where he'd seen him before. "But you make any trouble, you'll get called. What I can't handle, I've got twelve deputies to help me with." He paused a moment before he added "And they sling 'em just as low as you do."

"Twelve? In a town no bigger'n Hornbow?" Logan tossed some coins on the bar without touching his third drink. "On a sunny day this berg must twinkle like the crown jewels of England." He walked out of the saloon and took his horse to Ferrier's Livery, a block west.

Logan was racking his saddle when a shrill screeching in the air made him freeze. "What in tarnation!"

Jud Ferrier, the liveryman, spat tobacco juice into the bucket beside his makeshift desk. "Y'look like you never heard a train whistle before, mister."

"Train whistle?"

"Sure! We've had a spur line runnin' in here for better'n a year now." He squinted into Logan's face, then looked him up and down, thoughtfully. "You must have come in from the south if you didn't see the tracks an' them new cattle pens. From Lincoln County maybe? You sling guns in that range war down there?"

Logan had to smile at the crusty little stableman. "You one of the marshal's deputies?" he countered.

Ferrier shifted his wad into his other cheek. "Nope. Them's the twelve Apostles you'd be referring to. Maybe you come to make it thirteen. That'd be unlucky for somebody. Thirteen's always unlucky one way or t'other."

"You folks must pay some unholy taxes here in Hornbow."

Ferrier shook his head. "The town only supports the marshal. The Apostles ride for the Tamarack. Coming from the south, you rode right past the Tamarack road. After you crossed that log bridge and come outa the pines, you should of turned—"

"Nevermind, old-timer. Just tell me where I'll find the law office of Alden Bitt."

Ferrier grunted and shifted out of his chair. He walked to the door and pointed toward Custer street. "That flag up yonder is on the post-office. Alden's office is next door in the Stockman's Building, second floor. I don't reckon you'll find him in, though." He squinted at Logan again. "Haven't I seen you somewheres before, young feller? You from around here some—"

"Thanks." Logan dropped some silver into the old fellow's hand, and crossed the street. He was puzzled because his father hadn't told him about the new spur line. Perhaps his father thought he knew, but then again perhaps there were a lot of things he hadn't mentioned for good reasons of his own.

Logan was walking so rapidly he nearly ran down two small boys who darted out of an alley between the post-office and the Stockman's Building.

The youngsters stumbled to one side and their eyes grew large. Logan could see the fear in their faces.

"Gee!" he heard one of them softly murmur.

There was no other sound except the disturbed growl of a brown mongrel dog at their heels.

Logan squatted down on his boot heels. "C'mere, you mutt!" he called the dog.

The animal went to him and Logan roughed his ears. "You and me got too much in common to be growling at each other," he said, and the mutt began wagging his hind quarters and pressing up against Logan's boot.

"Gee! He—he *likes* you, mister!"

"Sure he does."

LOGAN rose and dug into his pocket. He handed the boys each a Mexican silver dollar. "Do you fellers know the name of the marshal here in town? That feller with the big brown mustache and the star on his shirt?" He hadn't wanted to ask the marshal himself, or the stableman.

Logan was answered by a woman who came out of the post-office behind him. "The marshal's name is Andy Spurlock, Logan. Does he worry you?"

Logan turned—to face Anise, and he looked her over brazenly. Eight years had not made too much change. Her bright yellow hair was piled on her head instead of hanging loose as it used to, and her eyes looked older. But these were small changes, and her characteristic haughty air was still in the lift of her chin and the cool blue of her eyes.

"Jim," she scolded one of the boys, "you and Danny go on to Aunt Rachel's like I told you! Go along now!"

The boys grumbled, but when Logan glanced back at them, they were kicking their way along the dusty street. Something struck him in the pit of his stomach at that instant! One of them was the boy!

One of them was supposed to be his son! They were about the same age and size, both with tousled blonde hair and in faded overalls.

Logan wanted to call them back and look more closely into their faces, but he dared not just then. He stared, trying to see something that would mark one or the other as the child of Tamarack.

"I'd like to talk with you, Logan," Anise said finally.

Logan returned his attenion to her. He shrugged. "I reckon I coundn't refuse my own sister-in-law. Here you been married for eight years, with a son growing up and all, and I haven't even had a chance to congratulate you." Logan shook his head in mock despair. "And a fine lad he is, too, Anise."

"We adopted him and nobody knows but what he's our natural son," Anise replied in a low, angry voice. "If there's a grain of decency in you, Logan, you'll leave it that way!"

Together they went up the stairs outside the Stockman's Building. Anise unlocked the door and led Logan into Alden's office. She seated herself behind the big flat desk as though she were accustomed to sitting there. Logan took a cigar from the open wooden box and seated himself in the leather chair across from her.

"Alden's at the Tamarack," she explained. "But I know why you're here, so we can settle this without bothering him. Your father lost the Broken Bit in a poker game, and there's nothing you can do about that. However, I'm sure my father will make some reasonable cash settlement with you to avoid trouble."

"Buy me off, you mean?"

"If that's the way you want it put!"

"I understand Alden sat in on that poker game."

"I wouldn't know about that. What difference does it make? You'll get what you want out of it."

Logan lit his cigar, then got out of the chair and walked to the window, looking down over Custer Street. "I wonder how drunk they had to get the old man before he put the Broken Bit on the table. Alden would have taken care of that problem, of course. He'd know just how slopped up to get the old man, short of making him pass out on their hands."

"Please don't make a moral issue out of it, Logan! The act doesn't fit you! Besides, your father will be better off without the spread. What good was he doing himself or anyone else, siting out there with a half-dozen broken-down cowhands letting the ranch go to seed? Nobody's driving him off. He can live there the rest of his life, if he wants to, and we'll see he's well-cared-for. He'll live better than he ever could on his own. Alden knew what he was doing, saving the spread before he inherited a run-down—" Her voice trailed off angrily in search of words.

YOUNG Bitt put in, with the chance, "The excuse is mighty lame, Anise, but at least you've admitted it was Alden's doing. And there's not much doubt who put him up to it. The Tamarack has always wanted the Broken Bit for its water. I be-

lieve your old man, when he bought the bank out here, found Dad's will leaving the spread to me. Of course, the will means nothing if he loses the place before he dies, but I also believe your old man found out I own half of Broken Bitt as it stands right now, so that's why he and Alden dreamed up this crooked poker game."

"You have no legal evidence of that!"

Logan smiled. "Obviously you *did* know about it. You've investigated, Anise. And you're right. The agreement between Dad and me is not writen. After I'd come back at his request to get him out of trouble a few times, he gave me a half interest outright. He isn't much, but he's my father. His handshake is good enough for me on any business deal. I'm not so eager to get his land that I want him to hurry up and die, but he's damned lucky he didn't will it to his *oldest* son."

"You've a filthy mouth, Logan!"

"You used to like it," he taunted her. "In fact, for quite a long time you couldn't make up your mind which you liked best, Alden's mouth or mine."

"I picked the right one, thank God!"

Logan laughed. "You didn't *pick,* Anise. Marla decided it for you, because after I took one good look at her, you didn't have any more choice in the matter."

"How can you even *speak* her name? After what you did to her—then running away to leave her to face the world by herself!"

"I didn't run, Anise. I was driven. And that boy isn't my son—couldn't be."

"Logan! You don't have to lie about it any more."

Logan snatched her up by the front of her blouse! His hand squared to slap her face, then he checked himself.

"Don't call me a liar, Anise," he said in a husky voice. "Don't you ever do that!" He let her drop back into the chair.

"Just the same," she said defiantly, straightening herself from his rough handling, "If Alden and I hadn't married and taken the child as soon as it was born, poor Marla would have lived with your shame all her life. That didn't seem to worry you much."

"I always wondered how you managed that, without word leaking out."

"We went away shortly after you did. All of us. We didn't come back until it was all over and Marla was well again. Nobody knew, not even the cowhands. But it almost killed Dad. He's raised Marla as his own daughter, like me, as if she was really my sister. You can thank God Alden made you leave. Dad would have killed you, Logan. He was like a crazy man when we told him!"

"I wasn't exactly overjoyed myself. By the way, how *is* Marla?"

"She's just fine, no thanks to you. She's happy at the Tamarack—which is another reason I want you to take your money and go away."

"I figured you had more than one reason. That gives me more than one reason to stick around. I'll make it plain, Anise, the way you've put it to me. I'm keeping the Broken Bit for my father, and before I leave I'm going to settle an old score, and a new one with my brother. When I'm finished with that—that dog, he won't bother Dad again. Not *ever* again!"

"Make trouble and you'll get trouble, Logan!" Anise promised defiantly. "If you want to leave here alive, you'd better leave now! We're not so helpless at the Tamarack as you may think!"

She impulsively grabbed the inevitable letter-opening dagger from the desk top, but Logan reached out and twisted it from her grasp. Then he threw it hard against the wall, the point biting deep into the paneling there.

A bit awed by her sudden ferocity, Logan studied Anise's flushed features for a moment. He said, "If Alden has to put up with a hellcat like you, maybe the worst punishment I could deal him would be just to let him go on living."

He left her standing behind the desk, tense with rage, and he went down the stairs to the street.

II

MARSHAL SPURLOCK looked up from his desk as Logan Bitt's bulk filled the doorway. He laid his pen down and slid the paper he was working on into

"Logan!" she cried, and the blossoms she carried fell to the path. "Logan Bitt!"

an open drawer.

"I've been expecting you Logan. Sit down."

Logan moved into the office and sat down across from the marshal. "I see you picked up my name," he remarked.

"I didn't exactly pick it up," Spurlock explained. "I remembered you—but you wouldn't remember me. I rode the Chokeberry line for old Dan Fergusen while you were leading the fight against General Hermosa for the Box J outfit."

"I see," Logan said musingly, studying the husky marshal with renewed interest. "Then we came mighty close to locking horns before."

Spurlock smiled, "Funny how that panned out, wasn't it? Fergusen and Jennings hired all the gunhands in the Southwest, all cocked and primed for a double-barreled range war. Then that renegade Mexican general starts hitting across the Border, and when they've

finally finished him off, the two outfits couldn't be nice enough to each other. It sure threw a lot of top notch gun hands out of work."

Logan nodded. "I never saw too much of the Circle F boys . . . You see much action up on the Chokeberry?"

"Hermosa tried to break through once. Mostly it was a watching and waiting game, which is a whole lot worse than fightin', for my money."

"I reckon it is," Logan agreed. He lit a cigar. Nothing further was said until the silence became too much for Spurlock to bear.

"Uh—I had something I wanted to talk over with you, Logan."

"Yes?"

"Well, let's say I picked up a lot of respect for you during that business down there on the Border. I know why you're in town, and I'd like to help you if there's any way I can."

"That's fine. I'm glad to hear it. There's sure to be trouble when the Tamarack tries moving their stock over onto the Broken Bit. It'll be a comfort knowing your behind me, Spurlock. But then, of course, it's your duty, seeing you're the law."

Spurlock shifted uneasily. "Well—uh—it's not quite that simple, Logan. Maybe you didn't hear. There was a poker game in town a few weeks back. Your father lost the spread. It—well, it's legally Tamarack land now. That's a plain fact, Logan."

Logan flicked his cigar ashes on the floor. "Spurlock," he said firmly, "even if the poker game *was* on the square, which it wasn't, only half of the Broken Bit belongs to my father."

"An agreement with nothing more than a handshake won't hold up in the court, Logan."

"You know quite a bit about it."

"Your father tried to welsh after he lost. He explained why he could turn over only half the land. It just won't hold up without a court record of the transaction. I'm sorry, Logan, but that's the way of it."

"If you're sorry now, Marshal, you're going to be real broken up by the time I've played out my hand in this business."

"Is that a threat?" Anger tightened Spurlock's voice.

"You know what it is without my puttin' a name to it. The poker game was a cheat, and I'm making charges right now against my brother and all those involved with him. I'll sign the warrants if you'll draw 'em up."

"That's plain crazy! You couldn't make charges like that stick in a million years!"

"Whether they stick or not isn't your concern. You going to serve the warrants?"

"Hell, no! I'd be laughed out of Hornbow!"

LOGAN got out of his chair. "Then I'll do it my way. And you better find something to take you out of town till it's over."

"Don't be a fool! Half the men on the Tamarack are sworn deputies! I know you well enough. You're not going to outlaw yourself by gunning lawmen!"

"I killed Marsh Hickman in Del Oro."

Spurlock's face went slack momentarily, then he, too, rose from his chair. "Sure! Del Oro! Hickman was renegade law and the citizens backed you up at the hearing. It's not the same here, Logan. The polls are free and folks in Hornblow are behind us all the way. You won't find anybody who'll speak a bad word against the Tamarack. Hell, man, it's Tamarack money that's keepin' this town on its feet! Colonel Moreau is practically a Holy name in this territory. I'm just tryin' to talk sense to you, man! I'm authorized to pay you a handsome price for the share of the Broken Bit you claim. Legally, you haven't got it coming, but that's the kind of man the colonel is. He'll pay you to avoid trouble, to save a few lives, maybe including your own. That's why folks think so high of him."

"What do you consider a handsome price?"

"Five thousand dollars. Only there's one condition. You're got to clear out and stay out."

Logan looked at him for a moment, then laughed softly. "With the water on the Broken Bit," he said, and the railroad here, I'd say Colonel Moreau is trying to buy out of trouble damned cheap."

"He might go higher. After all, you've got no legal claim to the land. Use your head!"

"It seems the colonel authorized everybody in town to offer me money. I expected the ante to be a whole lot higher, though. I'm disappointed in him, or maybe he just thought a cheap tramp gunhand would grab anything. Well, you tell him for me it's not money I want. I simply aim to keep what's mine, and what belongs to my dad. And one more thing, Spurlock. Since you refuse to issue warrants on my charges, I consider you and all the rest of your gunslinging deputies as renegade law. That ought to make it plain where we stand." Logan took one backward step toward the open door. "Now, you want to try arresting me, Marshal?"

Spurlock's eyes shifted evasively. "I've got no cause—yet."

"Well I'm going to give you cause aplenty, Marshal. And when you get the craw to come for me, bring some help. You'll get the fighting you missed on the Chokeberry."

Logan walked up the street and paused in the deep shadows under the arcade in front of the bank. He rolled a cigarette, the flash of his anger burned away, and an uneasy remorse settling in the pit of his stomach. He'd shot off his mouth, and that was one thing he'd sworn not to do.

Deep twilight lay upon the streets of Hornbow. Riders were coming into town in groups of three and four. Lighted windows were like square golden spangles up and down Custer Street, making the twilight turn to darkness. Logan leaned against the wall of the now closed bank and smoked thoughtfully. Night sounds were picking up all about him, and people passed within arm's reach without turning a look in his direction.

It was no longer a secret that he'd arrived. Between Anise and Marshal Spurlock, the news would get around fast. He'd done too damned much talking, and all he'd learned from it was the confirmation of what he'd suspected in the beginning—execpt for these unsolicited offers from the Tamarack. If the Tamarack was so sure of itself, why all these offers to buy him off? And why so low?

ACROSS the street in the Diamond Bar a piano began clinking out the melody of a camptown ditty. Logan flipped his cigarete into the street and went to the Baltimore Hotel. He took a bath in the barber shop, ate dinner, and went to his room.

Logan Bitt hung his clothes on a hat rack near the wash stand and snuffed out the lamp. The bed felt good. He lay there finishing his cigar, unable to keep his thoughts from straying back to the days that seeing Anise had recalled to memory. Maybe it wasn't so much his feeling for the land alone that made him determined to hang onto the Broken Bit. Somehow, to lose the spread would be to lose all touch with the past, with the only stretch of happines he'd ever known. He wouldn't have spent so much time thinking about those years if they weren't dear to him. The last few of those years especially, with Marla. When the disillusionment and resentment had worn away, the memory of her had fused itself with all his happier recollections of his boyhood. Probably his dream of some day settling down on the Broken Bit was unconsciously fused with her, too, although that was no longer a possibility.

Her quarter Indian blood made her quiet and thoughtful. Undoubtedly that was why she had been able to betray him so completely. Logan had pondered that agonizing question for eight years, and still there was no answer. It just didn't seem possible that a woman could act so deeply in love with one man, and be intimate with another behind his back. It was impossible to say who the man was. For a girl with beauty, any man who saw her was a good suspect. At first Logan had thought some man had forced himself upon her, but if that were the case, Marla would have spoken up to save him. Logan could only surmise that she'd kept silent to protect the real father of her child. And this thought hurt long after the immediate heartache had faded.

The only one who could get any delight out of the matter would be Anise. She had always enjoyed playing Logan against his older brother, and Alden had beaten Logan many times to keep him from Anise. But when Marla had become old enough to

leave the ranch, and Logan had seen her, the game Anise had played had been finished. She must have thoroughly enjoyed Marla's shame and the way he had been run out of the country for it.

Logan crushed out the stub of his cigar in a tray beside the bed. Making Anise suffer now was not exactly an unpleasant thought to go to sleep with. . . .

Logan awoke to the cold touch of steel against the side of his face. A voice said:

"Don't you move, Mr. Bitt. That's my forty-four kissing your cheek, so don't you move a muscle."

Instantly Logan was wide awake. "What do you want?"

"Just some talk. A chance to lay a proposition in your ear."

"How in hell did you get in here?"

"Right through the wall, Mr. Bitt. I come right through the wall, like the sound of sweet music." The soft voice chuckled. Logan felt the hair creep along the back of his neck. The voice went on, "I'm puting my gun away now. I'm your friend, but I had to come here real quiet so nobody would know, and I couldn't take a chance on you waking sudden-like with your finger on a trigger."

"I can sit up now?"

"Sure you can. Get you clothes on. There's a man wants to pallaver with you, and he's no Tamarack agent."

Logan got out of bed, his curiosity aroused. As the lamp winked up, he saw a man small in build, but wiry, a cocked grin on his youthful features.

"My name's Deuce Smith," the little man said, "for lack of something better."

"I see you worked the bolt free on the door," said Logan. I sleep light. You must have had practise at this sort of thing."

The man's gray eyes beamed with pride. "To get by in this world, a man's got to be able to do one thing better than any other man. Like you, Mr. Bitt. That's why my boss wants to see you."

Deuce would answer no further questions, but since Logan saw that he was under no pressure to go along with the man, he decided to do so on the chance it might turn up an angle he could use.

THE hotel lobby was empty and dark, save for one small lamp burning on the desk. It was almost four in the morning. The air outside was sharp and cold, cutting the last vestige of sleep from his senses. A faint blush of pink lightened the eastern sky, and there was not a sound in the air.

Horses were waiting behind the hotel. They rode toward the part of town which had been the officers' quarters when military post Hornblow had been nearby. They entered a yard in front of an impressive two-story house, went to the rear and entered the kitchen.

A Negro servant was setting the table. A fire burned in the big stone fireplace.

"Mr. White about?" Deuce asked.

"He'll be right along, Mist' Deuce, suh."

The aroma of fresh coffee and sizzling bacon sharpened Logan's appetite. White came into the kitchen a moment later—a tall, distinguished-looking man with black hair turning gray at the temples. He wore a crimson robe and slippers, and carried a glass of orange juice from which he had been drinking.

For a moment he said nothing, his eyes appraising Logan in a bemused manner. Then he put the glass down and smiled, his hand reaching out.

"This is a genuine pleasure, Mr. Bitt. I'm Layton White, and I took the liberty of expecting you for breakfast."

Logan shook his hand. "You send your invitations in strange ways and at odd times, Mr. White, but if that food tastes as good as it smells, I'll forgive you."

White laughed, and looked at Logan again with a re-appraisal, as though he had missed something.

"You don't talk like a gunfighter, I must say. But then, you are first a landowner, secondly a gunfighter. I suppose in this country the second necessarily follows the first."

"In more ways than one," Logan insisted. Instinctively he liked the gentlemanly dude, but could not overcome a deep sense of apprehension. They sat down at the table and were served by the Negro.

"You know that quite obviously I had a purpose in bringing you here, Mr. Bitt,"

White said.

"You talk. I'll listen."

"How much do you know about what's been going on here?"

"I know dad was cheated in a poker game. The Tamarack thinks it owns his Broken Bit, and I aim to change their minds. That's all I need to know."

White smiled tolerantly. "It's more fortunate we met than I'd suspected. For one thing the Tamarack bought out the bank here, and now holds all the mortgage paper on the small ranches in the territory. Those ranches have been going into debt because of the lack of water. Until the colonel can get the Broken Bit's water supply, he's allowing these small owners to stay on their property and keep it in repair. *But* once he has your ranch, he'll foreclose on everything! He'll own every foot of rangeland from his south basin to the eastern rim of the Painted Plains!"

Logan nodded, busily wolfing his food. "And what do you want, Mr. White?"

"About the same thing," White chuckled. "Except I'll settle for the land owned by these small ranchers, and I'll help you secure the Broken Bit in return for the grant of water rights."

"And how do you plan to shake the colonel loose from all that mortgage paper?"

"Simple. He can't afford to keep that money tied up forever. On the other hand, those range holdings would be of little value to him without Broken Bit water. Consequently, if we can convince him that he never will get Broken Bit, he'll be only too glad to sell the mortgages."

"Sounds all right. But what do I get out of it that I wouldn't get anyway?"

"Certainly you don't seriously believe you could beat them alone?"

"I aim to try."

"You've heard of the Apostles? They're veteran gunslingers, Bitt. Their leader is a man named Joe Sam. I'm sure you've heard of him."

Logan was startled. "Joe Sam? He's wanted in a dozen places—for murder!"

"But not here. Tamarack's legal staff, principally your brother, has defied all attempts to have him extradited. In my organization we have a few gunfighters, too, but we lack a Joe Sam. That's why I'm offering you our proposition."

Logan finished his coffee. He studied the Englishman for a moment, then said, "What's your deal, Mr. White?"

III

LOGAN BITT emerged from the pine slope to the bald summit of Bear Kill Ridge in the Mansino range. He paused to let his horse blow, for he had ridden steadily through the early morning hours after leaving White's place, and the sun now was high and strong. Behind him was Hornblow, and the Painted Plains was beyond. Down the west slope of Bear Kill, hidden from view of the town, Emmigrant Valley pushed a brown swath through the Mountains. Beyond it were more ridges with more basins hidden away like lonely little worlds all to themselves.

Far down Emmigrant Valley, Logan could see the spars of an old windmill. That would be Van Gault's place if he still lived there. The windmill was known as "Van Gault's Folly," but nobody had ever made him a laughing stock because of it. The water problem was too serious to all of them to make light of it in any way. Van Gault's windmill had started out like a gusher, but inside a month it hadn't been drawing enough to wet the bottom of his horsetrough. He'd tapped a pocket of underground water. When it had been drained, it didn't fill again until the winter rains.

Perched on the summit of the ridge, Logan got a sweeping view of this rangeland empire, from pine dark slopes of the Mansinos to the hazy end of the world out across the brown sea of rich prairie grass. He'd never thought much beyond the limits of the Broken Bit before, but now suddenly he was overwhelmed by the staggering wealth of this empire, just waiting for the touch of water to make it spring into reality.

Logan had always been too immersed in his own problems to take serious count of the situation. But at this moment the full scope of this war between Colonel Moreau and the British Land Company, which Lay-

ton White represented, dawned on him. The Broken Bit was the key that would open the precious water vaults. With so much at stake, why had the Tamarack offered him a lousy five thousand dollars? Perhaps they were more sure of themselves than he'd suspected. At any rate, he could be sure that neither side would stop at anything to get what they wanted. They would be like the jaws of a giant vise closing, with the small ranchers caught in between—and maybe himself, too.

Logan moved along the summit toward a trail that led down to one of the little known passes through the mountains, cutting miles off the trip to the Tamarack if the rider was not afraid of narrow ledges and deep gorges. Logan's affiliation with the Englishman did not rest easy on his conscience, but he was greatly relieved by one thing White had told him. An oral contract was binding on all parties, and so long as both he and his father still swore to the agreement, it had to be honored by a court of law. A signed statement from his father even this late in the game, would be strong evidence to take into trial. The Englishman had the money and the legal staff. On the other pan of the scales, Logan had disputed ownership of the Broken Bit, and a gun rep equal to that boasted by the Tamarack's top man. Why shouldn't he bargain with the British Company? His old friends in the valley were going to lose out either way. Why should he sink with them?

It was late afternoon when Logan came in sight of the Tamarack buildings. He pulled his horse up quick, and sat motionless. It hadn't changed, but the striking beauty of the plan awed him, as it always had. The gleaming white walls and red clay roofs, the lush, tropical trees and the gardens exploding with color—it was unreal, like intruding upon some sacred spot.

The Tamarack headquarters lay in a small basin, surrounded by pine clad slopes. To the south, a wide pass opened onto the great rangeland that bordered the Broken Bit. The little basin was known as God's Pocket, and maybe that was why the twelve gunmen employed here had been dubbed the Apostles.

LOGAN moved along in the shade of the pines, circling the basin. He reined up again when he saw a woman in the garden below. His heart skipped a beat for that instant, but as she moved out of the shade, he could see her white hair. The colonel's wife—the only person on the Tamarack for whom he held no grudge. She was a handsome, soft-spoken woman with gentle ways, completely subdued by her arrogant husband. Logan had sensed that she favored him over Alden. She had even tried teaching him social manners secretly, telling him right from wrong in parlor etiquette. Logan wondered if he dare approach her now.

But the impulse quickly passed. No sense in getting her involved.

Logan's reverie was interrupted by five riders who came in hard from Tamarack road. They reined up at the ranch house and disappeared inside. The distance was too great to be sure, but Logan would have bet his saddle one of them was Joe Sam. He would also have given long odds that he knew what had caused their distress. He had disappeared from under their noses! His own horse was still at Ferrier's stable, and he'd hired no other from any of the available sources. It wasn't going to be easy to protect Alden from him if they didn't know where he was. They were like boys who let go of a wild cat in a dark room.

Logan would have given a lot to see the look on Alden's smug face at that moment. Logan was surprised, however, when Alden emerged with the gunmen a few minutes later. The six rode away from the Tamarack at break-neck speed. Mrs. Moreau stood in the garden, watching. When they were out of sight down Tamarack Road, she picked up her basket of flowers and went into the house.

Logan pinched his cigar out angrily. He hadn't counted on Alden having the guts to leave the Tamarack. Already shadows were lengthening across the little basin, so he knew it would be foolish to try to work his way back through the mountain passes after dark.

Logan led his horse down a circling path that brought him in behind the log bunkhouse at the south edge of the basin.

Through the grove of trees, he could see lights winking on in the ranch house. He wrapped the reins around a pole on the corral and walked around to the front of the log building. The door was ajar and the bunkhouse was empty.

This, of course, would be the headquarters of the Apostles. The regular cowhands would be bunking out at the line camps that studded the great Tamarack rangeland. If he could be sure none of the Apostles were loitering about, a little talk with the old colonel might save his ride out here from being a total loss.

Logan moved stealthily away from the bunkhouse onto the garden path. The spicy aroma of Nicotinia rose up about him and he stopped dead still! For an instant his brain spun as though he were drunk. Memory flooded in too fast to be repulsed and he felt himself strangely overcome. A small tightening at the base of his throat and moisture in the palms of his hands were all that remained after the first wave had passed. He was not sure, but he thought the foliage along the path ahead of him moved slightly. His hand dropped to his gun.

"Who—who is it?" a soft voice demanded.

A sharp tingling ran down Logan's nerves that left his arms and legs half numbed. The sound of her voice made him sure he was out of his head!

"Logan!" The handful of blossom she carried fell to the path. "Logan Bitt!" Her small cry held a mixture of joy and pain. The sound of it snapped Logan from his trance.

"Be quiet, Marla!"

HE MOVED to her and put his arms around her, pressing her face against his shoulder to muffle any outcry. They stood like that for some time, neither of them speaking or moving. Logan felt his arm tightening about her, so comfortable and warm against him. Then she pushed gently away and looked up, dark hair falling about her shoulders, the same childlike look of wonder in her soft brown eyes.

"Logan—you *haven't* come to kill them!" Her tone was almost a prayer.

"Is that what they're thinking?"

It was hard to keep his mind on what she was saying. He felt all ploughed up inside, with deep buried pains and hungers forced to the surface. He wanted to clutch her and shake her till she cried for mercy!

"They're afraid of you," she told him. "It—it's like a plague had moved into the country. Everybody's afraid!"

"You?"

Marla shook her head slowly. "I could never be afraid of you, Logan." Her hand touched his arm and lay there. "Why did you—" She faltered, then mustered courage and said quickly, "Why did you go away without seeing me?"

"A bull whip and a hangman's noose. I didn't have much say in the matter."

She nodded, and her eyes fell from his. "But somehow I expected you to come for me, just the same."

"Somehow I lost the inclination."

Marla turned away as though she'd been slapped. "All right, Logan. I know you have a right to—to feel the way you do. But—" She turned to him again, her voice sharp with desperation. "Logan, please don't kill them! Please don't do that!" A sob choked her off and she swayed unsteadily. "Oh Logan—Logan!" She threw herself onto him. "For the love of God, don't *hate* me!"

She wept bitterly and deeply, and he could think of nothing to do but hold her close until her sobbing eased.

"Don't beg me for anything, Marla," he said then. "What I've come to do isn't going to be done without some trouble. They brought it on themselves." He put his hand on the back of her head and kept her pressed to him. "The Tamarack's pushed me around all my life. They are not going to push my old man. The Broken Bit's our land, and I'll kill to keep it."

"But not the colonel!" she pleaded. "He's a good man, Logan. He's wrong, but he *thinks* he's right. He doesn't deserve to die." She clenched her fists into the back of his shirt. "It's the colonel and your brother you hate the most, but you mustn't kill them, Logan. It would ruin you!"

"They've tried hard enough to do that."

"Alden is weak," Marla protested. "He's greedy and weak, but you can't kill your own brother. Not without killing some of yourself."

"Marla, I'm not going to kill anyone who doesn't force my hand, but I'm going to get their clutches off the Broken Bit—and if that means killing 'em to do it, then I'll kill."

Her voice was thick in her throat. "You're so full of hate and violence! I can feel it, like it was boiling inside you!" There was a long moment of silence in which they stood embraced, feeling the nearness of one another, and Logan could have told her the boiling inside him wasn't all a matter of hate. "What are you going to do here tonight, Logan? Your brother is gone."

"Are any of your father's gunslingers around? The colonel's, I mean. I still want to call him your father."

"He *is!* He's been a good father to me, the only one I've ever known. That's why I'm begging you—"

LOGAN cut her off sharply. "Don't beg! There's nothing I can do about it, so don't ask me. How many gunslingers are here?"

"Four, I think—or five. Two were in the house with Dad when I left, and I heard Rankin say some of the boys were over at the blacksmith shop doing something or other."

"You wouldn't lie to me, Marla? I know you'd do anything to protect the colonel."

"No. Not *anything,* Logan. I don't want you killed, either."

"Just the same, I think I'll scout this out for myself. You come along and be dead quiet."

She took his hand. "We'll go to the side by the swing. You can see into the parlor from there."

"Why are you trying to help me?"

"My reasons wouldn't matter to you."

He pulled her up short. "What reasons? Answer me!" His hands took hold of her bare upper arms. The fresh, fragrant aroma of her hair plucked some violent impulse inside him and he squeezed her arms till she cried out.

"Logan! Don't—please!"

He relaxed his grip. "Why didn't you speak up for me? You didn't have to name the other man. You could have just said it wasn't *me!* Why didn't you?"

She buried her face in her hands, and he could see her fingers digging into her flesh. "Oh dear God! I can't stand any more of it!"

Logan shook her until her head snapped back, her eyes wide and swimming with tears. Then his lips were upon hers and he lifted her from her feet as the warm moisture of her own lips and the salty taste of tears blinded him to all but the hunger that had crouched inside him, chained by his will for eight unhappy years.

"I don't care what happened! Just tell me you're sorry! Tell me you still—"

"Logan! I love you! I've always loved you! And I told them you weren't to be blamed. But there was no one—I mean, they wouldn't believe me!"

He cut off her words with his lips, hungry and demanding. For a long time the only sound in the night was the measured clink of a hammer in the blacksmith shop. When he let her go she said:

"I'll help you, Logan, if you'll promise not to kill the colonel—or your brother. I *want* you to win! But not at that price."

He hesitated. "I'll make you this bargain. If they don't shoot at me, I won't shoot at them. That's all I can promise."

"I know they won't do that," she said quickly. "Not Alden nor Dad. Remember, we've made a bargain now. Alden and those other men who just rode out are headed for the Broken Bit. I couldn't hear what it was all about, but they were in a hurry, leaving here."

Logan stiffened. He hadn't figured anything like that. "I'd better get home then, and fast! But tell me first, where is that paper Dad signed in the poker game."

"In the bank vault. But it isn't important, Logan. Dad said he wasn't counting on it for much. The witnesses at the poker game are enough to establish his claim."

"I want that paper, for my own reasons."

"Then I'll get it for you."

"*You?* But how could you—"

"Never mind. I'll get it for you. I'll have

it by tomorrow night. Tell me where you're staying in town."

IV

AT SUNUP, Logan reached Broken Bit. His horse was lathered and blowing hard, but he figured that by taking the steeper trail over Punchbowl, he had gained back most of the lead the Tamarack riders had over him. It had cost him his horse, however. The animal wouldn't be good for at least a week.

Logan pulled up in the pines a hundred yards from the house. Dismounting, he pulled his rig from the spent horse. There was a light burning in the house, but no horses about, and no sign of life. The air was bitter-still at this time of the morning. If anybody'd been there, they could have heard him coming for half a mile.

Logan crossed the open space, his guns drawn. He kicked the cabin door open. The room was vacant, except for a blanketed figure on the lower bunk. Logan stepped inside. With the muzzle of one revolver, he drew the blanket back. His father's glazed and empty eyes stared up at him! He'd been shot through the chest!

"Freeze, Logan!" The sharp command came from hte doorway behind him. "Drop the hardware!"

Logan let his guns roll forward on their trigger guards, but as he did he dived sideward and twisted in mid-air, firing both weapons point-blank into the doorway! A rifle blast deafened him! Its slug buried into the beams overhead as the rifleman spun back out of the cabin and sprawled across the wash stand outside with a crash of tubs and buckets!

Logan kicked hard at the leg of the table, tipping the lantern off the edge and smashing it to the floor. He beat out the flames with his hat. Slugs whined in through the open door and smacked into the walls, but it was dark inside now, and the advantage was all his.

Suddenly the shooting stopped. Someone called, "Logan!"

It was Alden's voice. Logan inched up to where he could see out the window. He could make out two dark shadows crouching behind stumps. There likely were others behind the woodpile, still others along the far wall of the shed.

"Logan, can you hear me?"

Alden was behind the corner of the shed. A slug would not penetrate the double thickness of the planks. The men in the yard were his best targets. He moved to the far window, which put them at more of an angle to him, with more of their bodies exposed, squeezed off two quick shots and was rewarded by screams of agony before he ducked. A volley of lead spattered the cabin.

"Hold you fire, men! Logan—for God's sake hear me before it's too late! We thought *you* killed Dad!"

A horse stamped and blew from inside the shed, which accounted for the absence of mounts when Logan had ridden up. He eased up to the window, and saw a man dragging a limp leg, trying to reach the better protection of the woodpile. The man threw a wild shot at the cabin as he moved, and Logan returned his fire. The man fell flat on his face and did not move again.

A slug smashed into the window sill inches above Logan's head. Alden shouted again for his men to hold their fire. The other wounded man cried out to surrender, and a sharp snarl from the shed cut him off. Joe Sam was there with Alden. That meant only one behind the woodpile, unless they'd picked up some others on their way here.

"Logan! I can't keep these men from shooting at you if you shoot at us! I don't want you killed! Answer me—your last chance!"

Anger drover words from Logan. "Is it the same chance you offered Dad? I'm going to kill, you, Alden! I'm going to kill you and every blood-sucking gun rat on the Tamarack!" He emptied one revolver and each slug shaved the corner of the shed, ripping loose a long splinter that dangled out at an awkward angle.

FOR several moments it was silent then. At last Alden cried out, his voice trimmed with emotion.

"For God's sake, Logan, *I* didn't kill Dad! Are you crazy?"

Logan reloaded his guns. His throat

ached from the choking grief and anger he'd been holding down. Now his eyes misted and shapes blurred when he looked out the window. Down inside him, he didn't want to believe Alden had killed their father. But he knew Alden was a liar. About *this* he certainly would never tell the truth. Still, there was an outside chance—

"Come on over and talk!" Logan called out. "Come alone! I'll give you ten minutes to say your piece, and I'll drill you if another man out there makes a move!"

It became so still he could hear the drip of water from the upset wash stand outside, and the sound of a horse brushing against the wall of the shed. Again it was quiet for a long time. The wounded man in the yard moaned softly. It was getting lighter, and Logan could see that the man had torn his shirt to make a tourniquet for his leg.

Then Alden's voice lifted in the stillness.

"I'm coming out, Logan! Hold your fire!"

Logan's heart quickened. He inched forward, pushing one revolver closer to the broken window. Alden emerged hesitantly, his shoulder first, then the rest of his body.

"For God's sake, don't shoot, Logan! I'm unarmed!"

So was Dad, Logan remarked to himself.

"This was no trap, Logan, if that's what you're thinking. We heard you coming. I thought it was you. I wanted to talk to you without gunplay."

"You're talking."

Alden was at the door. Logan was surprised at how youthful his brother looked. The sun touching his blond hair reminded Logan of how it used to glisten under the sun in happier days.

"Can I come in?" Alden asked.

"Suit yourself."

Alden stepped inside and his face paled a bit at sight of the guns aimed at him.

"It shouldn't be like this, Logan. We're brothers!"

"Don't remind me."

"Be reasonable, Logan. I only did what I knew was best—best for Dad, and best for the range here!"

"I know why you did what you did. Let's talk about this!" He waved one gun toward their dead father.

"Logan, you've got to believe me!" Alden cried despairingly. "I didn't kill Dad! Good God of Mercy! What do you take me for?"

"A cheat—a liar—a murderer." Logan spat on the floor. "Any more questions?"

Alden's chin trembled. He sank into a chair. "What—are you getting at?"

"I don't have to tell you, Alden. You wrote the book. I'd lay my right arm to the fact that you found out the British Company's lawyers were going to get a statement from Dad and give you a fight in court. An oral contract *is* good. You're a lawyer, and you'd know that. You had to get to Dad before he gave them any signed statements."

"About what?"

"About my owning half of the Broken Bit! Cheating him in a crooked poker game wasn't enough. You had to—"

"That's not the way of it, Logan!" Alden cried. "The Tamarack's trying to hold this range against the British Company. The colonel bought the bank to get the mortgage paper on all the small ranches—to keep the British Company from buying up the paper and foreclosing on everybody. We just couldn't take a chance on them roping Dad in and getting control of Broken Bit water! It's that simple. It *had* to be White's gunmen who killed Dad. Can't you see? They got here ahead of us!"

LOGAN said sternly, "They had reason to want him alive. You're lying, Alden!"

"I'm telling you they got here yesterday, got his statement and killed him—well, probably to make you sole owner!"

"That's pretty damned weak, and you know it. They weren't going to take any action until I'd had a chance to play my hand. I know that, Alden. I can't tell how long Dad's been dead. I'm no expert at that sort of thing. If I could, I'd kill you right where you sit. And when I've got my proof, I'll do the job—you can count on it, Alden. I'll clean out the Tamarack."

"You're *wrong,* Logan! The colonel wouldn't order anything like this done! He's a good man, regardless of what you

think. He's saved the land for all our old friends, and it has cost him plenty. The folks around here all look on him like a god. Go ask them yourself."

"That doesn't surprise me. He'll enjoy playing the rôle until the time's right for him to turn. Then God help everybody he holds in his power. You don't convince me, Alden. An honest man doesn't use cheating methods—or even condone murder."

"My God, Logan, if you think I'm that rotten—why don't you kill me and get it done with?"

"I made a promise to someone. I've got to give it a chance to work out."

"Marla?"

Anger burst in Logan. He lashed out with one boot and kicked the chair from under Alden, sending him sprawling.

"Go tell your hired butcher boys to get a wagon here! We'll take Dad out to Five Oaks like he always said he wanted, bury him there by Mother. And you can tell your colonel this—there'll be Bitts beneath and above this ground, and a Broken Bit brand on the market long after the Tamarack's a bloody cabbage patch!"

Joe Sam remained with the brothers at Five Oaks while the only other able-bodied Apostle on the job rode to Hornblow for a doctor and the minister. Joe Sam's eyes were cat-wary as he watched Logan pacing the grass beside the small, fenced-in burial plot. It was Alden's turn on the shovel and he had peeled his shirt. His skin was white and soft-looking, reminding Logan of a maggot against the brown of the freshly turned earth.

Two headstones occupied the far corner of the plot. One was his mother's, whom he had never really known. The other was that of a sister who had died in infancy before he was born. Logan felt a strange, brooding sadness as if he were in the presence of his family with whom he had never got acquainted. He felt more alone now than ever in his life, and wished it was over. He wanted to get away.

"How come you don't take a turn on the shovel?" Joe Sam growled at him.

Logan stopped his pacing for a moment. "Because I'd have to turn my back on you."

"Why, you—"

"Joe!" Alden snapped. "None of that! We made our deal, and we'll keep it."

Logan was sick and angry, and in no mood to argue. He kept his eyes off the blanket-wrapped figure under the trees. His last words to his father had been harsh and cruel. He despised himself for them, but this made him ever more determined to square the count. That was the least he could do. If it *was* Alden and the colonel, he'd see them swing by their necks, if he

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THE DARKENING TRAIL

by Oliver Bassett

When the dust of the trail has settled,
And the evening is clear and cold,
When the flame from the fire is dying,
And the blankets have been unrolled.

Then while the men are silent,
Each with his memories,
Thoughts of the past come swiftly,
Like the touch of a canyon breeze.

And often the smiles which lingered
As afternoon slipped away
Fade as the darkness takes them
Down the byways of yesterday.

---

had to do it himself. Marla couldn't expect him to stand by with his hands tied once he'd proved their guilt. The rest of the Tamarack he'd be free to sweep clean. They weren't involved in the promise.

He kept pacing as the shovel changed hands. Maybe Marla was playing against him. She'd fooled him once . . .

Logan tried not to think about it. She'd been younger then. There could have been a lot of circumstances about which he knew nothing. He could afford to forgive, even if he could never quite forget. He'd been no saint in the between years himself.

JOE SAM threw the shovel blade down into the pile of soft earth. "That's it!" He wiped his sweat- and dust-smeared face with his handkerchief. "I'm damned if I like it, Alden. This man's your brother, but I'll kill him if he pushes one more inch!"

Logan met the angry hate in Joe Sam's eyes. The gunman buckled on his rig, then wiped his hands dry.

"Drop the rag!" Logan ordered.

Joe Sam came alive. The red cloth fluttered to the ground. "You calling me?"

"Dig that grave one inch deeper!"

Joe flushed. "Why, you dirty—" His guns slicked from leather!

Logan drew with his right hand and fired. Joe Sam's hat bounced above his head as though pulled by a string. His guns blasted lead into the tree tops as he spilled across the mound of earth, arms thrown out wide. One hand dangled over into the grave. As his fingers went slack, the gun fell to the bottom. Logan had shot his heart out.

"Get his gun out of there, Alden," Logan ordered. "Drag him outside the fence."

Alden stood in stunned silence, his eyes wide-staring.

"Move, damn it! I hear the wagon coming!"

Alden's mouth fell open. He swallowed hard, then he said, "You beat him! You beat Joe Sam!"

"I'll tell you something, brother of mine," Logan replied through clenched teeth. "Every time a man turns on me I feel that whip across my face. It' easy to kill 'em because I just make out its you! And I made myself learn to shoot faster'n a whip's snap. So you can thank yourself for what you're up against now. Just get your prize gunslinger outside the fence. He'll never be buried on Broken Bit ground. There's two more back at the cabin. After we're through here, load 'em all into the wagon and take 'em back to the colonel as a token of my good intentions!"

The four Broken Bit hands arrived in time for the funeral. With Logan and Alden and the minister, there were seven in all to pay their last respects. Logan was somehow disturbed to notice that the only moist eyes in the group were those of the four cowhands who had spent most of their lives working for his father. Jeremy Bitt's own sons stood at his graveside dry-eyed and angry.

Dr. Barnes arrived from the cabin in time to see the last shovelful of earth patted firm and the wooden marker driven into place.

"That man you wounded will live, Logan, but he'll never walk the same. All in all, you've had yourself quite a day, haven't you?"

Logan met the stern, reproachful eyes. "Not yet, Doc. It's barely past noon."

"Listen to me, son!" The medico put his hand on Logan's shoulder to keep him from turning away. "You were Jeremy's favorite, his pride, his whole reason for living. He'd want you to listen to what I've got to say."

Logan hesitated stubbornly, then shrugged and they moved off to themselves as the funeral party began breaking up.

"This is your land, Logan," Dr. Barnes said, "and you have a right to it. But this brutal, mad butchery . . . Logan, you're destroying the very thing you're fighting so hard for!"

"You don't make sense, Doc. I'm in no mood for philosophy."

"I'll spell it out for you, then. By fighting the Englishmen's battle for them, you're putting a strangle-hold around the throat of the Broken Bit. By this maniacal killing, you're drowning your own self-respect in blood! You'll never be the same, and you'll come to hate the land you fought so savagely to hold!"

LOGAN interrupting, protested, "There's a whole lot you don't know, Doc. One thing I can tell you. Since I left here a kid of fifteen, I've made a profession out of fighting for other men's range. I learned something, Doc. The most important thing a man can own in this world is land, a place to put his feet where no other man can step on 'em. The Tamarack started this. They declared this war. When they killed my dad, they threw away the rules, and that was their mistake. They're playing a game I know better'n any slinger they've got—and I'm going to break the Tamarack's spine like it was a dry pine stick!"

Dr. Barnes shook his head sadly. "I may know more than you think, Logan. A woman, you know, especially a very young one, needs a doctor's care for quite some time after she's borne a child. I should tell you this, no matter how—" He hesiated, then pursed his lips as though his jaws ached from the effort to restrain himself. "Do yourself a favor, Logan—for me. Ride out and talk to some of the small ranchers. Will you do that?"

Logan was startled and angered by the doctor's knowledge of Marla. "You stalling for time, Doc?"

"In a way, yes. Time, Logan, for you to grow into a man."

He turned and walked to his horse. Logan watched him ride away through the trees, wondering how he could ever have looked up to that man as a boy.

Logan singled out an animal from the Broken Bit corral. George Burtch, his father's foreman, stood silently at the gate until Logan was mounted. The canny old blue eyes of the range veteran watched Logan's every move.

As Logan rode out of the corral and George slid the poles into place behind him, the ramrod asked, "Where you headed, son?"

"Town."

"Figuring to go by the road?"

Logan shook his head. "Could be riding into a Tamarack ambush that way. I figure to cut wide. May be some folks I can talk to on the way."

The faintest smile touched the grizzled face. "If they miss you on the road, likely they'll lay for you in town."

"I don't think they've got the guts for a showdown there."

"You got any orders for us?"

"Any what?"

"Orders. You're boss of this outfit now. It's your spread."

Logan was taken by surprise. It hadn't occurred to him that the responsibilities of running the Broken Bit were suddenly square on his own shoulders. He hadn't planned to settle down to it so soon.

"Carry on with whatever Dad had you doing for now," he said. "If anybody comes here making trouble, don't fight. You just cut loose and come for me."

The foreman nodded. As Logan started to move off, Burtch called. "It's not true about you and the Englishman, is it, Logan?"

Logan turned in his saddle. "What's not true?"

"You're not tied in with 'em?"

Logan shrugged. "I'm not fool enough to think I can go on fighting the Tamarack alone forever." He turned away from the bitterness that crept into the older man's eyes. "I don't know, George," he amended. "I just don't know yet."

V

BAIGE HOLLOMAN was bent over a piece of machinery alongside a newly built shed a few hundred feet behind his house. Baige shouted a greeting and came forward, wiping his greasy hands on a rag.

"Jane heard you was in town, Logan. You been back several times and never took the trouble to stop by. Missed a lot of good cooking by snubbing your old friends that way."

Logan dismounted and grasped the extended hand. He saw Baige's eyes drop to the low-slung holsters.

"That's why I didn't come, Baige. I wasn't sure I'd be welcome."

"Hogwash! So you're a gunslinger!" the rancher humped his shoulders in a careless gesture. "From what I hear, you kept on the lee side of the law, did right proud

by yourself in that Border trouble."

"Thanks, Baige. But I remember you didn't take to guns and fighting . . . What's that contraption you was working on when I rode up?"

Baige showed him. It was a small steam engine. "She's supposed to pump water, but I'll be hanged if I can get it to work right. You know anything about steam engines, Logan?"

"No. Where'd you get it?"

"Shipped in from the East. According to the geologist who has been studying the range there's water down there, if I can just get up the pressue to bring it to the surface."

"You rob a bank, Baige?"

The freckled face broke into a sheepish grin. "Colonel Moreau's underwriting the expense. He holds the paper to everything else I own, though, so I might as well owe him a few hundred more."

"He talked you into this? How do you know it's not just another pocket like the one Van Gault ran into?"

"I don't. But there's five of us trying the experiment. If one hits deep water, we'll pool it."

"Anybody had luck?"

"I guess Alex Thompson's drawing enough for his house and horses. Saw him the other day, though, and he said it's pooping out on him. Trouble is, none of us knows enough about the new fangled contraptions to get 'em to working right."

Logan shook his head. "And if one of you did hit a true vein, how'd you get the water out to where it would do you some good?"

"I reckon the colonel would see to it."

"Baige, I never thought you'd be a sucker for a game this crooked. I hate to spoil your dream, but if anybody turns up big water out here, the colonel will snap up your land so fast you won't be able to get your shirt tail tucked in before you're traveling. He's got you all right where he wants you."

The rancher's eyes lost their friendliness. "You better explain yourself, Logan," he said coldly.

Logan said, his tone a little exasperated, "It's right in front of your nose, if you'd just step back and take a good look at it. When the Army post and the reservation moved out, leaving you no close market for your beef, you boys went to trail-driving and sold at bottom prices because you didn't have enough water to hold your herds over. Year after year you went in debt to the bank, not much at any one time—just enough to keep going on. But it piled up. So the colonel buys the bank. He's made it cream easy for you to keep on going in debt to him. Now that's there's a spur line into Hornbow, you folks with your little pot holes of water, you can't run enough beef—well, you tell me, Baige, how many *good* years, not counting the probability of market failures, how many *good* years will it take you to pay off Colonel Moreau?"

BAIGE looked at the dismantled engine. He shook his head sadly.

"A long time, Logan. A hell of a long time." He kicked at a pile of wooden wedges. "Your dad could help us, Logan. There was a time he said he was willing to share your water, when none of us knew a way to get it out here. We could get a man here who knows something about these steam engines. He could pump a lot of water out of the Candy river without you missing a drop of it. But now your dad is talking to nobody."

"He figured he'd just be wetting it down for the colonel, Baige. He knew the colonel would foreclose once the range was worth something."

"The colonel swore he'd *never* foreclose! He's been more than fair, Logan, and you can't deny that. No pressure, more money whenever we need it. I don't think anybody's made a payment on a mortgage for over three years, but we're still on our land."

"You sound mighty fond of the colonel."

Baige studied Logan for a moment, as though weighing his words, and what their effect would be, before he said:

"Logan, that man's saved us all from plain ruin! I heard about your father being roped into that poker game, but there must have been more to it than what's on the surface. All I know is, the British Company would own everything east of the Mansino Moun-

tains if the colonel didn't take care of us. You won't get anywhere tryin' to talk him down to us little ranchers, Logan. That's just a word of friendly advice."

"He'll take care of you like he took care of my father, when he's ready to make his move."

"I don't get you, Logan."

"Tamarack gunslingers killed my dad last night. They wanted to make sure that swindle they worked with a deck of cards wouldn't fold up on 'em."

Baige lost the color in his face. He put a hand on Logan's arm. "I—God in Heaven be my witness, Logan, I'm sorry I spoke hard of him! I—I'm just plain, downright sorry!" He took his hand away and fidgeted with a mole on the back of his wrist. "The colonel—you must be mistaken, Logan. He wouldn't do a thing like that. I *know* he wouldn't." Baige spoke softly.

"What you don't know about that would make a heap of reading, Baige. But as long as you're still sitting on your land, I reckon you'll find a way of excusing everything the colonel does."

Baige said nothing as Logan mounted. He stood sober and thoughtful until Logan was swinging his horse away, then cried out:

"Damn it, Logan, if that was on his mind, why'n't he do it a long time ago? He could foreclose any time he wants! What's he waiting for?"

Logan looked back at his old friend standing with his hands outstretched and his face pinched with hurt.

Logan smiled as he said, "Let's hope he's waiting till you get that contraption working right for him, Baige. That'd beat a ninety-nine-year lease." The rancher's anger was punctured. "Give Jane my regards. I've got to be movin' right along now, but I'll be back for some of that good cooking, if I'm still welcome."

Baige grinned and stuck his hands in his pockets. "You better make it soon. You're ornery enough they'll be hangin' you some day."

It was dark when Logan reached the Flying B. John Belter answered the door with a lantern in one hand and a gun in the other. He hesitated, then lowered both.

"You come here on behalf of your British friends, Logan?" The drooping black mustache, sprinkled with gray, accented the scowl on his face.

THE Belter place was nearest town of all the ranches. Word got to them quickly.

"I stopped to ask some questions, John—for myself," Logan said.

The rancher held his position in the doorway for a few minutes, looking Logan up and down, then stepped back.

"Sorry to hear about your father, Logan. Come in."

Logan stepped into the parlor and took off his hat to Mrs. Belter whom he had seen only a few times in town as a boy. She immediately shooed their two wide-eyed young sons up the ladder to bed, as though Logan was an unfit sight for their innocent eyes.

"You had some questions, Logan?" Belter asked.

"I've talked to a few of your neighbors, John. Everybody feels kindly toward the Tamarack. I wondered if you go along with them. That's my first question. Maybe it's the only one I'll have to ask."

"I had paper at the bank, too, when it started to fold. If it hadn't been for Colonel Moreau, the British Company would own my land man. How do you expect me to feel about him?"

"He almost had you hanged once for rustling cattle. If it hadn't been for my father, they'd have swung you, John. That all forgotten now?"

Anger clouded the rancher's face and his chin hardened. "I'll pay that debt any time and any way you ask, if that's what you've come for. But I won't go against the colonel. He didn't know his foreman had sold me that stock. He had a right to think I'd rustled it, until Jeremy came up with the proof."

"No man's got a right to *lynch* anybody, but that's not the point."

"I know it. The point is, Jeremy forgot who his friends were. A little Broken Bit water could have changed things a lot. The colonel's got a way of getting it out here now, but I reckon you'll take the same stand as

your dad did. It's not our fault we owe the Tamarack. It was that or lose our land to the British outfit. But because we've got the smell of Tamarack on our hands, we can go to seed before the Broken Bit lets loose one drop of water! That the way of it?"

"No that's not the way of it," Logan told him. "If you could get shut of the colonel—John, I'll tell you like I've told everybody else today. If I turn that water over to you, the colonel will foreclose. It's that simple. There's got to be a way of tying his hands first."

Belter's eyes grew canny. "We all know you're all working for the Englishmen. We're not buying anything you've got for sale, Logan. You're not the first agent they've sent among us."

"Oh? This is news to me."

"Well, I'll tell you more. Coming out here askin' the kind of questions you have, and passing the remarks you've just made won't win you any friends among us folks."

"What about these agents you were talking about?"

Belter shrugged. "What about 'em?"

"Tell him, John!" Mrs. Belter insisted. "You can't turn your back on Jeremy Bitt's son. What can it hurt to tell him?"

Belter ran his fingers through his steeling hair. "Smart young lawyers. Always offering to loan us money to buy out from under Tamarack. I reckon they figure we was born with our brains in the seat of our pants! We know what they're after. Not more'n a month ago some feller was by here offering us money on a minute's notice if the Tamarack tries to foreclose. Hell, the colonel don't foreclose. But miss one payment to those Englishmen! We'd be down the road scratching sand for far places, I'm tellin' you!"

LOGAN nodded. "I see. I thought maybe they'd sent some of their guns by to threaten you."

"Not with the firepower the colonel's hired on at the Tamarack! That's another thing. Having that kind of fighting material behind us, we rest a heap easier nights, thanks to the colonel."

Logan elected not to advise the rancher how he'd reduced that firepower. Quite obviously the Tamarack had kept that part of the episode secret.

"I can't say who's right or who's wrong, John," Logan admitted, "but you can bet that British money at your disposal has a lot to do with the colonel's generosity about overdue mortgage payments. He doesn't dare press you."

"That's a plain matter of opinion," the rancher defended. "It all depends on where you're standin' how it looks to you. We're not about to bite the hand that's fed us. Your fight with the Tamarack's your own affair. Don't try ringing us in. You cut yourself off when you sold your gun to the damned Englishmen!"

Logan's temper crinkled, but he fought it back. He nodded respectfully to Mrs. Belter.

"When I sell my gun hand, John," he said finally, "I always take the trouble to make sure I won't be sorry when the fight's won. In this case it don't matter, because either the colonel or the British Company is bound to wear the other down eventually—and you folks lose either way. It's even too late to do anything about it."

He put on his hat and left, the door slamming hard from John Belter's hand. As he rode off he could hear the rancher's angry voice berating him.

VI

HORNBOW was asleep when Logan rode in. He turned his horse into Ferrier's corral and got up to his hotel room without being seen. When he turned the lamp up, he saw a brown envelope on the floor just inside the door. It was the paper his father had signed in the poker game, transferring ownership of the Broken Bit. His signature was so distorted Logan could barely make it out. This was what Logan had suspected, and why the colonel hadn't wanted it produced as evidence of his claim to the Broken Bit.

Logan folded the paper and forced it into a slit on the inside of his boot. He dropped onto the bed fully clothed. Marla had kept her word. She must have put herself in an

awkward spot by doing it. But Logan was so tired he couldn't think any more. He rubbed his eyes and tried to make sense of all he'd learned, recall all he'd said. It was so muddled up he wasn't sure of anything.

They'd killed his father. The old man was dead. He'd been a weak man, maybe, but good. Alden was weak the other way—bad. A man couldn't help being weak, maybe. He still had to count for what he did with his weakness. Maybe Alden didn't do the killing himself, but he had to know they planned to do something to the old man. It wasn't *just* weakness that made him look the other way while it was being done.

Marla didn't know. He could believe that, not after the way she talked in the garden. She'd got the paper for him, too. That was to save the colonel's life, according to their bargain. Nobody did anything for you for nothing.

Why should he worry about these grubby little shirt-tail ranchers. . .

Logan had meant to rise early, but the morning sun was strong in his window when he awoke. He pulled on his boots, groggy, and unable to shake the sleep from his head. There was enough water in the pitcher for him to wash and shave. That helped sharpen his senses. He felt hungry, which was a good sign.

The hotel clerk gave him a startled look as he crossed into the dining room. Logan knew his presence would be a secret no longer, but the showdown could not be postponed anyhow. He took a table where he could sit with his back to a wall.

He had pushed his plate aside and was finishing his last cup of coffee when Marla came through the lobby archway. She headed straight for his table.

"Have you been to your room?" she asked, anxiously.

Logan nodded. "I got the paper. Now all I've got to do is get to court with it. But I don't think they'll let it come to that."

Marla sat down. "Logan, you've got to clear out. Just for a little while. You promised there'd be no bloodshed."

He could tell by the almost hysterical pitch of her voice that the Tamarack wasn't going to take the loss of their gun deputies without seeking revenge. And now they had an excellent motive for killing him.

"I promised I wouldn't kill Alden or the colonel," he told Marla. "That's *all* I promised. And that doesn't hold if they start shooting my direction."

Her eyes wavered and she looked down at her hands. "They didn't kill your father, Logan. I know Alden wouldn't allow a thing like that! You must hate him terribly to suspect—"

"Did Alden tell you how the gunplay started? Did he?"

Marla shook her head. "He didn't come back to the Tamarack with Quinn. We don't know where he is. Quinn said you jumped them from ambush after they found your father murdered. I didn't believe that. I rode back to town and Dr. Barnes told me what he'd heard from you. That's what I believe, except I know—I just *know* Alden had no part in it!"

"Have you talked to Alden at all since?"

SHE shook her head. "No. I can't find him. He hasn't been home. We thought —that is, Anise was worried that you—"

"That I'd killed him?"

"Yes."

"And were you worried about it?"

"Yes. Why should I lie to you? If you thought he'd had anything to do with—well, with your father's death—I thought you might have done something violent." She looked at him gravely. "You must be very good with your guns, Logan. Joe Sam was supposed to be the best."

"Nobody's best! There's always a better man somewhere. That's what takes the fun out of it, what makes it a losing gamble. Joe Sam's luck just ran out, that's all. He wasn't best by a full half second, and that's a long time in this game."

"I don't care how good you are!" she flared. "You've got to get away from here, Logan! Quinn's bringing all the Tamarack gunmen who are left to get you. Nine of them, I think. Quinn was rounding them up when I left, and Davey just rode in this morning with a warrant he gave Andy Spurlock, in case you try to leave. Davey told me Quinn isn't but an hour or so behind

him! The colonel believes you murdered his men, Logan! He thinks you may have murdered Alden! You won't have a chance!"

"That was foolish of the colonel," Logan said. "He's forcing me to a decision I'd almost decided to pass up." He got to his feet.

Marla stared at him, then her eyes grew round and she reached out for his arm. "No, Logan! The British Company *wants* this! It's what they've—"

"You want to stop any killing, don't you?" Logan asked her bitterly. "Well, this paper you stole for me, that's tall proof my dad was too drunk to sign his own name when they swindled him. I'll give that to White, and I'll make out a will leaving the Broken Bit to him, in case I should drop dead from one cause or another. When the colonel finds that out, you'll see just how eager he is to have me lynched!"

"Logan!"

He turned from her and went out into the street. Nobody does something for you for nothing, especially not for love, he was thinking. She'd delivered the paper to keep her foster father alive. Now she wanted him to go away without using it.

Alden was standing under the arcade just outside the door, waiting. Logan's hand dropped to his gun until he saw that Alden was unarmed. She'd lied to him about that, too! Alden had been with her all the time. He was red-eyed and drawn, like he hadn't been to bed at all. Too busy planning his brother's future.

"Logan," Alden said at once, "I know they're coming. But I—"

"They're coming all right. But five gets you ten they don't get what they've come for!" He brushed past, not heeding Alden's weak protests.

Spurlock was not on the street. But White spotted Logan the moment he stepped inside the British Land Company office, and steered him through the half-dozen desks where clerks sat with their sleeves pulled up by black bands, and with green visors shading their eyes. He could see eye rolling up so the clerks could watch without lifting their heads. It was plain that White demanded a full day's work for a day's pay.

IN THE privacy of his office, White sat down, offering Logan a chair.

"I have extremely good news for you, Logan!" He fished in his desk drawer and produced a long sheet of paper. "Here's the statement. This is all we need! A statement made by your father in the presence of three of our attorneys. It covers that oral contract you—"

Logan snatched the paper from him! He stared at it, stunned by the handwriting he knew so well.

"Not so fast, young man! This is a business arrangement, if you recall. There's a matter of water rights and—"

"You *were* there! *You* killed 'im!" Logan wadded the paper into his fist. The Englishman's face turned ashen with rage.

"Don't destroy that, you—"

"And don't draw, Mr. Bitt," Deuce's voice advised. He stood in the doorway with his gun leveled. "Give the statement back to Mr. White. You haven't filled your end of the deal yet."

Logan glanced from one to the other as the scene unfolded in front of him. They'd taken his father's statement to bait him to their side, then had killed him so he couldn't make the same statement to anyone else. Logan turned to face the desk, unscrambling the wadded statement.

"You really must believe me, Logan," White explained solemnly. "I didn't issue orders for it. Your father was most reluctant. He wouldn't believe you'd joined our cause. He was going for a rifle when Deuce shot him, and I'm terribly upset that it happened. However, I had no idea you would take it so hard. From what you said the other morning—"

Then White shrieked! For Logan had spun and lurched sideward. Deuce's shot ripped past his shoulder! Then Logan's gun muzzle was inches from the small man's middle, muffling the explosion that ripped out his insides! Without looking, Logan slashed with the barrel of his gun, catching White across the side of his head as he was diving for his desk drawer! He groaned and slumped unconscious to the floor, spilling a waste basket under him. Among the scattered papers was the crinkled statement, but Logan had no de-

sire to possess it any more. He stepped over the dead little man in the doorway and walked past the clerks who now were crouching against a far wall.

The shots had suspended motion along the street outside. Logan stood above the steps leading down from the arcade porch, gun hanging muzzle down in his hand. Spurlock came running out of an alley across the street, but stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Logan.

"You—you all right, Logan?"

Logan slumped one shoulder against the arcade support, wearily. "Yeah, I'm all right." His thumb hooked over the hammer and cocked it. "You come to arrest me, Andy?"

"I've got to, Logan. You just kill somebody else?"

"Yes, I been real busy killing people. Deuce in there, he shot my dad. I killed him and I parted White's skull down an inch or so. There's three attorneys had a hand in Dad's killing, too. Then there's me. I'm the one who sent 'em there to do it. That may sound funny, but it's a fact. I made it worth their while, by just being in the business of killing people."

"That's a lot of nonsense, Logan. Something's wrong with you, the way you're talkin'. You're drunk or something, but I've still got to arrest you."

Marla appeared from nowhere. "Logan! Thank God! What happened?"

"You think you *can* arrest me, Andy?" Logan called, paying the girl no attention.

"No. But I've got to try. There comes a time when a man can't hedge on what's his to do any longer. I think you know what I mean, Logan."

LOGAN caught his lower lip between his teeth and thought about it, then he nodded. "Yes, I know. But why, Andy? What made it happen now?"

"Maybe I'm sick of being had for a price —even for a good man's money. You're one bloody son, Logan, but you make a man want to be his own. I'll tell you this. There'll be no lynching. You'll beat this Joe Sam killing. All you got to do is submit to legal action." He paused a moment, studying Logan. "About Deuce, I don't know. I've still got to put you under arrest."

"Logan!" Marla cried. "Please, don't—"

He glanced at her, saw that she was staring at the gun in his hand. He lowered the hammer, dropped the revolver into holster. Then he shifted away from the post and walked down the steps to face Spurlock.

"It's a fact, Andy. I gave 'em reason to murder my own father. You shouldn't be worried none about arresting a man with no more insides than that."

"I don't think you ever *murdered* anybody, Logan. Least of all, your father. I know White's attorneys. I'll get 'em."

Logan reached for the buckle of his gun rig. "Do that, Andy."

Marla cried suddenly, "Don't take his guns! Here they come!" She ran to the marshal and stayed his hand. "For the love of God, they'll lynch him if you take his guns!"

A group of riders who had rounded the corner two blocks away came on at an easy lope.

"You've submitted to arrest, so you're in my custody," Spurlock said to Logan. "There's no law says I have to disarm you."

The riders spread out as they stopped, blocking off the street. Quinn, with his silver conchas and wide-brimmed Mexican hat, led the party.

"What's the matter, Andy?" he jibed. "Couldn't you rub the burrs off him?"

"He's under arrest," Andy replied. "I'm takin' him to jail, so move out of the way, Quinn."

"Those weren't your orders. You was told to keep him from leaving town. We'll take care of seeing justice done."

Colonel Moreau and Anise pulled up in a buckboard in time to catch Quinn's remark. Logan pushed Marla toward the stairs and told her to get inside.

"I'll shoot down the first man who lays a hand on my prisoner, Quinn!" the marshal defied.

Quinn smiled. "That's all right, Andy. None of us want to get our hands dirty. . . . Where's the rope, boys?"

"Wait!" Colonel Moreau shouted. "I didn't send you here for this! I'll have no

lynching! He has murdered, and the law will punish him. Have no fear it won't!"

"That's not true, Colonel." Alden Bitt came from the alley, walking slowly. "And that warrant isn't worth the paper it's written on." He took it from Andy's pocket and read it. Then he tore it up in front of their startled eyes. "You can't sign a warrant on hearsay evidence. Quinn's a liar."

"Alden!" the colonel exploded. "What are you saying, boy?"

"We jumped Logan in the cabin. We had our guns on him when he fired his first shot. And when Joe Sam got his, he drew first. Logan fired in self-defense, and I'm the only living witness to that, so you *couldn't* know enough about it to sign a warrant, because I haven't seen you or anyone else since it happened."

The colonel sat down on the buckboard seat slowly, his face an oval of astonishment. "What's happened to you, Alden? I can't understand—"

Alden motioned at someone waiting in the alley. Young Jimmy Bitt emerged. He paused there a moment, half frightened, then trotted across to his father's side. Alden was looking at Logan. He saw recognition dawn in Logan's eyes, and he nodded.

"I've wanted to tell you a hundred times, but—" He checked his words and turned to the buckboard. "Colonel, bring Anise to my office. And send these hooligans back to draw their pay. There'll be no more need for gunslingers on the Tamarack."

"But Alden! You don't know what—"

"Quinn!" Alden shouted angrily. "Swing around and ride!"

The gunman looked at the colonel. "Do as he says," the colonel agreed in a soft, reluctant voice. "Wait for me there."

As they rode off, Alden said, "Get Marla, Logan. Meet us in my office."

VII

YOUNG Jimmy Bitt was not present when Logan and Marla arrived. Anise was there, however, standing by the window looking out over the street, nervously twisting a silk handkerchief through her fingers. Colonel Moreau sat in a leather chair, elbows on his knees, his face lowered into his hands.

Alden came around from behind the desk as Logan closed the door. He said, without waiting for his brother to speak:

"I understand the clerks in the British Land office heard what Deuce said, saw him fire first. That puts you in the clear, Logan. I thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks. But that's not what we're here to talk about. Where's the boy?"

"No need for him to hear what will be said here. He's not responsible for any of it."

"He's the spitting image of you, Alden. I should have recognized that when I first laid eyes on him."

Alden said, without reservation, "Because he's my son, not yours. I'm not denying that any more."

"Why, Alden? Why'd you do that to *me?*"

"Because I'm weak—a coward. Because I'm selfish. There's just no way to soft pedal the explanation, Logan. I lied, cheated, and used you and Marla to cover up for us." Alden hurried on, "Anise and I—we were afraid to tell the colonel we had to get married, but just asked him if we could. He wouldn't hear of it, said we were too young. So we worked on Marla, on her loyalty and sense of indebtedness, and got her to tell the colonel she was the one who was going to have a baby, knowing he'd send her away to avoid scandal. We convinced him to let us go along to take care of her. We were married as soon as we got clear of the Territory. Anise had her baby and we came back, letting the colonel go on thinking the child was Marla's, and that we had married and adopted the boy to prevent any scandal. That way he wouldn't object too much to our marriage, either, but would think of *us* as the loyal ones. Each lie bred another bigger lie, and—well, that's the sorry truth of it."

Logan was struck dumb. Until this instant the possibility that Marla was *not* the mother of the child had not penetrated his dazed reason. He looked at her now, but she avoided his eyes.

Logan reached out and took her arm, turning her to face him.

"I—I don't get it!" he stammered. "You had nothing at all to hide! Why'd you—"

"I owed the colonel too much," she said, speaking as though she'd had the words ready for a long time. "I knew the truth would crush him, to know of the sin of his own flesh would break his heart. Since I was adopted, it would not hurt him so much to think that I, not Anise, was the guilty one."

Logan's fists knotted as he stared at Alden. "If you'd only once, somewhere along the line, let me in on the truth!" he said despairingly. "Couldn't you see what you were doing to everybody? Every person in the whole country here has suffered on account of our damned fool lies!"

"I know," Alden admitted. "Why do you think the colonel's become poverty-stricken, just to help them? When he learned the truth, that Anise and not Marla was Jimmy's mother, he tried to buy back the family pride by laying out nearly every dime he owned to take over the neighboring ranches before the British Land Company grabbed them. After that, the ranch folks had to have money to live on, so he's gone in debt to his ears with the Bank of Austin to provide for them."

THE colonel moaned softly, face in his hands. "I wanted their gratitude!" he confessed. "I had to have it to keep living with myself! I didn't even have the decency to ask Marla to forgive me!"

Marla put her arm around his hunched shoulders. "I knew how you were suffering," she said, "and I'd have died rather than make it any worse for you."

"We've reached the end of the rope, Logan," Alden went on. "Before long, we've got to start paying the interest on all we owe in Austin. We haven't got it. We don't know where it's coming from. With Broken Bit water we could have swung it. That's why I swindled Dad. I was desperate. After what we did to you, he wouldn't talk to us about *any* kind of deal. It looked like a way out of all our trouble, cheating him to save the ranches of all these people."

Logan studied his brother for a long time before he asked:

"Then you're not going to contest my rights to the Broken Bit?"

"How could we? You've got the paper. You've seen the signature. Dad was too drunk to hold the pen by himself. No court in the world would honor that transaction. But the important thing, Logan, is that we don't want to contest it. You said you'd break the Tamarack. Well, just break me, Logan. I'm the guilty one."

Logan lit his cigar and paced the floor, the others watching him in silence. He met Marla's eyes.

"You sure haven't changed much," he said to her. "You're even prettier, is all."

"I stopped living when you left, Logan," she said, as if they were alone.

"Do you forgive these people?" he asked.

"I forgave them a long time ago, because I knew they were trying to do good. They've paid too much already."

He nodded, taking a thoughtful drag from his cigar. "I haven't been exactly spreading joy through the world myself. There's a lot of folks I could take some forgiving from, too, so I think I'll just join the parade."

Logan turned to face his brother. "Now I can't have my own flesh-and-blood nephew growing up in an atmosphere of poverty and unhappiness. You say those bankers in Austin are pressing you. Well, I've got a few pesos cached away. Meantime we better start working out this water problem."

Alden stared in disbelief. His mouth worked on words that did not come forth. He clutched Logan's arm and shook him. Then he turned away, his back to them as he brought his hands up to his face.

"God be my witness, Logan Bitt—" the Colonel began.

"No speeches, please. The one private speech I've got to make to Marla should last me quite a spell."

"The same one, Logan," Marla inquired, a twinkle of mischief in her eyes, "that you tried so hard to make when we were kids?"

Logan eyed her suspiciously. "I reckon that's it."

"Then, just as before," she told him, her glow of happiness belying the imperious tone she put in her voice, "I must insist that you speak to my father first."

Logan shrugged. "That won't be hard. I've got him in a much better bargaining position now." He turned to the colonel. "How about it, sir? Water for your daughter?"

Gun Doctor

by J. M. DECKER

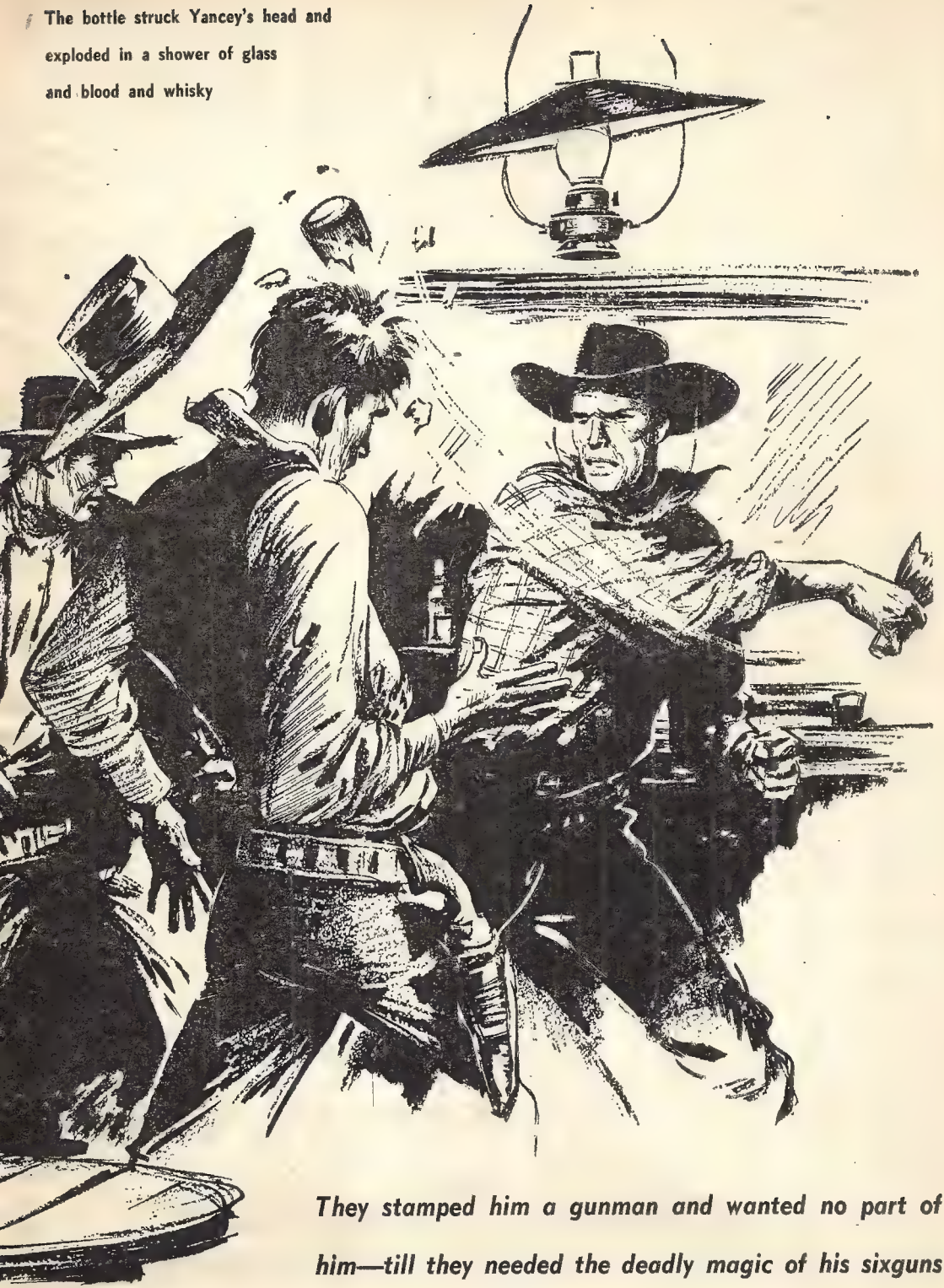
I

LOOKING at the expectant faces of the men gathered in the big room, Jim McCord felt temper begin to stir far back in his mind. In a voice deliberately devoid of expression, he said, "No, I guess not. You got any snakes to kill, I reckon they're all yours."

John Gaylord said mildly, "That's not a neighborly way to feel, Jim. When a country's in trouble, every man ought to throw in and help out."

McCord turned his eyes on John Gaylord, owner of the L 7 Ranch where the meeting was being held. He said, "Neighborly? You've been neighborly, John. Outside of that, people act like I was a cross between a buffalo wolf and a mad dog."

Gaylord said, "Well—" and let his eyes drop to the floor. He looked back at McCord. He said, "You came to this country with a reputation for being a fast man with a gun, Jim. I reckon maybe folks have been a little slow making up their minds about you."



The bottle struck Yancey's head and exploded in a shower of glass and blood and whisky

They stamped him a gunman and wanted no part of him—till they needed the deadly magic of his sixguns

"Two years," Jim said. "You could call that a little slow."

Across the room Frank Sears said, "You've made a damn good thing of your horse ranch since you come here, McCord. Most of that success you owe to your neighbors."

McCord turned his gray eyes on the tall, slat-thin owner of the Rafter S. He said, "Other folks around here buy their ponies from me for the same reason you do. There's no place else they can get as good stock for the same money."

John Gaylord smiled faintly. He said, "That ought to hold you, Frank." He glanced around at the assembled men and added, "Anyone else?"

The man on Jim's right said, "I wonder if McCord would mind telling us how it is that he doesn't have to pay like the rest of us?"

THE man's words put an abrupt end to sound and movement within the room, as completely as though someone had thrown a switch that controlled all movement. In the first moment of startled silence McCord was aware of John Gaylord caught in awkward suspension half out of his chair. And of John's daughter Judy, just entering the room and frozen in surprised immobility in the doorway, a steaming pot of coffee in one hand a tray of cups balanced precariously in the other.

Jim turned slowly and found himself facing a man of remarkable physical perfection, a man with the face and build of a young Norse god. The big, smooth-muscled body would top McCord's own six feet by at least two inches, and a heavy mane of hair, like molten brass, served to accent the deep blueness of his eyes.

It should have been a pleasure to look upon the man, but there was something in his eyes that did not quite fit; an appearance of innocence that was not quite true. As though their frankness were a conscious thing, a sly deception.

For a long moment Jim studied the man before him. It seemed unlikely that the fellow didn't realize the implications of his remark, and yet it seemed equally unlikely that he would deliberately antagonize a person whose assistance he was seeking.

Jim decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. He said, "I'm going to take it you didn't mean that like it sounded, Reese. I reckon Trace Riordan and his boys don't try their game with me because it isn't worth it. They'd sure as hell earn every nickel they collected and you can figure they know it."

He turned back to John Gaylord. "Trace charges you so much a head for protection," he said. "If you don't pay up your fences are cut and your stock run off and your stacks burned." He paused a moment before he added, "Sure as hell there's no doubt in your mind about who's doing the rustling."

The old rancher refused to meet McCord's eyes. He watched his daughter cross the room with the coffee pot and tray. He said, half apologetically, "Trace claims these rustlers know his reputation, says they're afraid to raid a place that's under his protection."

Jim McCord said, "You trying to tell me you believe that?"

"No," Gaylord said slowly. "No, I reckon there's not much question about it."

"Then why bring your troubles to me? You've got a sheriff in this country, haven't you?

"Be a hard thing to prove to the law, Jim."

"Likely. On the other hand, I never heard of a man getting anything done without he at least gave it a try."

Gaylord said, "Well—" and paused. He kept his eyes on Judy, pouring coffee at the table. He said, "We talked of doing that, but we decided against it. Riordan's tough. He's fast with a gun, and I reckon he's clever enough in some ways. But it just didn't seem to us that he's smart enough to be the brains behind this thing. He's too reckless, and there was nothing reckless about whoever has planned the raids we've had."

McCord said, "I'll go along with you there. I reckon Trace is considerable sudden."

"Well," John Gaylord said, "if we want Trace arrested, somebody's got to make a complaint. If it's true that Trace isn't top man, the man who complains is likely to be

out of the cow business plumb sudden."

McCord was suddenly aware of the tense faces of the men around him, waiting hopefully for his answer. These men were cowmen, skilled in their own line, but they were not gunmen. They could handle guns with reasonable efficiency, and were capable of handling the average run of trouble that beset a ranch. But against the threat of organized and skilled gunmen they were helpless. They depended then upon their law, and if the law could not help them they had no defense.

THEY were honest men faced by something that had got beyond them, and Jim was sorry for them. But stronger than pity was his pride, and he could not bring himself to offer help. For two years these people had treated him as an outcast, with only the widowed John Gaylord and his daughter offering their friendship. Jim knew enough of human nature to understand the reasons for his slow acceptance. He also understood it well enough to realize that an offer of help now would be interpreted by most of the country as an attempt to buy his way into favor, and his pride recoiled at the thought.

He saw the sudden disappointment in Gaylord's eyes and knew the old rancher had guessed his answer. He said, "Sorry, John," and stood up.

For a brief moment disappointment clouded the older man's eyes. Then he shrugged and said, "Can't say as I blame you. Likely in your place I'd feel the same way."

McCord bent for his hat and Judy Gaylord said, "Just a minute, friend. I didn't stand over a hot stove making this coffee just so you could run off without even tasting it. Sit down."

He sat down. In the presence of that unfamiliar and unpredictable species 'women' he was always ill at ease and unsure of himself. Particularly when the woman happened to be Judy, whose curly brown head came scarcely to the top button on his shirt, and who had a disconcerting habit of treating him like a delinquent school boy one moment, and a few minutes later fixing wide brown eyes on his face and apparently entranced by every word he said.

He took the proffered cup and said, "Thank you, ma'am." He balanced it precariously on his knee and rolled a smoke He lit the cigarette and watched her move about, a strange contentment filling him. . . .

The next morning Jim McCord was in the breaking corral with a rope in his hands before the sun was an hour high. Three four-year-olds, bunched at the far side of the corral, eyed him suspiciously and whistled their distrust. He draped the rope over his arm and rolled a cigarette, idly pondering which one to catch first, and giving them time to get over their first nervousness at his presence in the corral.

He had finished his smoke and was shaking out his loop when he saw the two riders. He hung his rope on the snubbing post and walked to the gate, leaning on the top rail and watching the approaching riders. As the men drew nearer he recognized the thick, bull-like figure of Pete Kelton, and a moment later the man's pardner, Yancy Ellis.

For a brief moment he thought of his guns, left in the house that morning because they interfered with his movement in the corrals, and then he dismissed the thought. After all, there was no reason to expect trouble. He had never had any quarrel with Trace Riordan or his two sidekicks, Pete and Yancy.

The two men rode up to the corral and drew rein. The massive Pete Kelton wasted no time with preliminaries. He said, "Hear you was to a meeting at Gaylyord's last night."

McCord said briefly, "You got damn good hearing."

Pete paid no attention. His too small, dull black eyes were utterly emotionless. He said, "Trace don't like it."

Jim McCord said, "Well, now, that's too damn bad. You reckon I'd ought to ride in and apologize?"

Yancy laughed, and without turning his head Pete said tonelessly, "Shut up, Yancy." He added doggedly, "Trace don't like it. He says you'll have to join up."

Jim felt another flash of regret for his absent guns. He shook his head. He said, "You boys get anything out of me, you're going to earn it."

Pete didn't change expression. He said, "Trace said you don't have to pay nothing. All you got to do is join."

Yancy Ellis said, "Trace's afraid if you get away with holding out it might give some of the other boys ideas. All you got to do is say you're paying."

Still without turning his head or raising his voice, Pete again said, "Shut up, Yancy," and sat staring plegmatically at Jim, waiting for his answer.

McCord thought quickly. If he refused outright, the apparently emotionless Pete would probably shoot him on the spot, with no more regret than if he were swatting a fly. On the other hand, he had a reputation for being a hard man, and too quick acquiescence would be suspicious and probably disastrous.

He said, "I'll think it over. I reckon I'll ride in and see Trace after dinner."

II

JIM McCORD'S answer seemed to satisfy Pete Kelton. He picked up his reins, then paused. For the first time a gleam of some hidden feeling showed far back in his black eyes. He nodded toward the horses in the corral. He said, "Top looking ponies you got there. Too bad if they went into the winter with no feed." Without waiting for an answer he reined his horse around and, followed by Yancy, rode off the way he had come.

McCord walked to the house and got his guns. He buckled the heavy belt around his waist and went back to the corral. He opened the gate and turned the three geldings into the home pasture, where twenty-five or thirty other young horses grazed, waiting their turn in the breaking corral. He led his saddle horse out of the barn and mounted, reined him around toward John Gaylord's L 7 and gave him his head.

As he rode through the pleasant morning Jim McCord's mind went back to the events of the night before. That one of the men who had been present was an informer for Trace Riordan was obvious; Trace could not possibly have found out about the meeting so quickly through casual gossip. The problem was to find the man. With the exception of John Gaylord, Jim knew none of them well enough to offer more than a wild guess, and he refused even to consider John in the rôle of traitor. He was still no closer to a solution when he rode into Gaylord's yard and dismounted in front of the hitch-rack.

As he finished tying his horse and turned toward the house the door flew open and Judy came running toward him. He knew instantly that something had gone wrong and hurried to meet her. They met in the middle of the yard and she seized his arm in both hands.

She said, "Oh, Jim! I'm so glad you're here! Dad's hurt!"

He looked down into her face, still streaked with the signs of recent tears, and he felt a wave of anger wash through so intense that it was physically painful. He looked away from her so that she would not see what was in his eyes.

Forcing himself to speak with a calmness he did not feel, he said gently, "Bad, Judy? What happened?"

She said, "Doctor Marsden says there's nothing broken, but they hurt him so bad just the same!" Fresh tears welled up in her eyes at the memory and she wailed, "Oh, Jim!" and buried her face against his shoulder.

Over the top of her head Jim saw the ranch house door open and the yellow-headed rancher, Carl Reese, stepped out onto the porch. For a moment Reese hesitated, as though about to go back inside, then he stepped off the porch and walked over to the couple in the yard.

He nodded to Jim, said, "A bad business, McCord."

Jim again asked briefly, "What happened?"

Carl's eyebrows lifted slightly over his innocent blue eyes and he glanced at Judy. He said, "Didn't she . . . No, of course not. Well, it seems that after we had all gone last night John heard the horses raising a commotion in the barn. Naturally he went to investigate, and when he stepped through the door someone slugged him." Reese paused a moment, then went on, "Judy was in bed and didn't know he'd gone out. She

didn't miss him until this morning and then she went looking for him. He was conscious when she found him, but he was considerable beat up and she had to help him to the house."

He paused once more and Jim asked sharply, "Doc Marsden's here?"

"He just left. I rode in a few minutes after Judy found John, and of course I went right after Marsden."

The girl's sobbing had gradually ceased and she pulled away from Jim McCord's shoulder. She said, "I'm sorry to be such a baby, Jim, but it seems so senselessly mean! Why would anyone do such a thing to Dad?"

"Why," Jim said, "I reckon it was meant as a hint not to hold any more meetings. Likely Trace wants the boys to take their medicine without trying to plot against him."

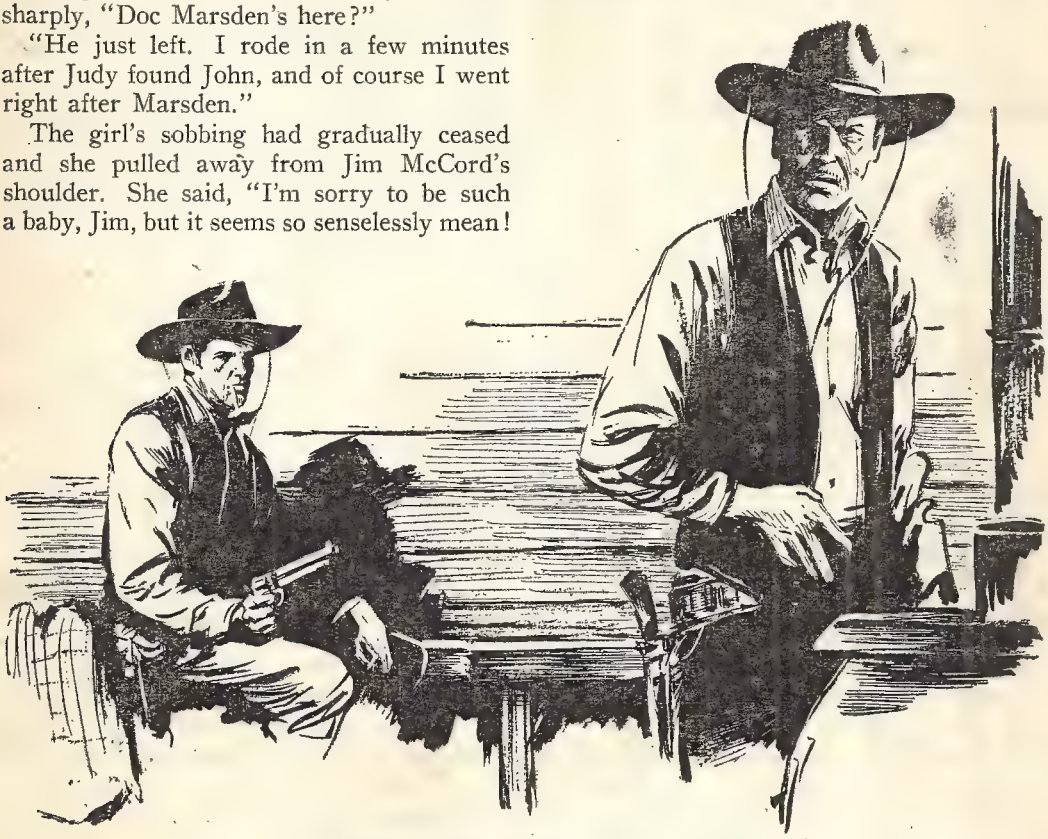
REESE said almost eagerly, "That's the way I had it figured. John thought it might have been a horse thief, but I don't. Because—why the beating after he was unconscious? A thief would have knocked him on the head and let it go at that."

Jim turned to Judy, "Is John in any shape to talk now?"

She said, "The doctor gave him something and he's asleep. Is it important?"

He said, "It'll keep. I rode over to tell him he had a spy in the crowd, someone reporting to Trace. I reckon he knows that by now."

Reese asked, "How did you come to think that?"



"All right, Yancy," said McCord. "That's far enough."

McCord said, "Trace's two boys, Pete and Yancy, were out to see me this morning. Wanted me to join up. They knew all about the meeting last night."

Reese said quickly, "You going to do it?"

Jim gave him a long, thoughtful look. He said, "I don't reckon Riordan's got anything for sale that I can't furnish for myself." He paused and added, "That reminds me, I told Pete I'd be in to see Trace. Reckon I'd better be trailing along."

Judy followed him to the hitch-rack to get his horse. She said, "You'll be careful, won't you, Jim? With Dad hurt and all, I don't think I could stand it if you. . . . You be careful!"

He grinned down at her from the saddle. He said, "I'm always careful," touched the spurs to his horse, and rode away.

It was just after noon when Jim McCord rode down the dusty main street of Eagle Butte and dismounted in front of the Buckhorn Bar. It was still too early in the day for much business and the big barroom was dark and cool and deserted. He walked over to the bar and rested his elbows on the polished mahogany.

He nodded to the bartender who came to take his order. He said, "Seen Trace Riordan about this morning?"

The bartender shook his head. He set out a bottle and glass on the bar. He said, "Rode out yesterday evening. Haven't seen him since." He moved back down the bar and picked up the newspaper he had been reading when Jim entered.

McCord poured a shot of liquor into the glass and stood nursing it in his hand. He had expected to find Trace at home in his rooms above the bar, and now he was in for an indefinitie wait. Either that or ride home without accomplishing his purpose, neither of which ideas appealed to him. He tossed off his drink in disgust, and his hand was on the bottle for a second one when the door opened and Pete Kelton and Yancy Ellis came into the bar.

For a moment the two men hesitated just within the door, then Pete said something to Yancy in a low voice and they walked over and lined up beside Jim.

Jim McCord stood nearest the door, with Yancy on his left and the massive Pete on the far side. The bartender set out two glasses for Pete and Yancy. He glanced inquiringly at McCord, and when the rancher showed no signs of offering the two men a drink, he got out a fresh bottle and put it beside the glasses and went back to his paper.

Pete paid no attention to anything but the bottle. He reached out one huge, hairy, knuckled hand and grasped it.

Yancy turned his glance briefly sideward on McCord. He had the eyes of a coyote; cold and utterly merciless, with a hint of cowardice and a sly humor somewhere in their yellow depths. He said, "Getting particular who you drink with, McCord?"

Jim said briefly, "That's right," and watched the man drop his glance in confusion at the unexpected answer.

YANCY turned his back and picked up the bottle that Pete had returned to the bar. His hand trembled slightly as he poured the amber liquor into the glass, and Jim thought, He's the one to watch!

Pete was dangerous because he was afraid of nothing. But Yancy was even more deadly, because he had a craven streak that could cause him to strike at any moment, suddenly and without warning.

Pete had paid no attention to the exchange between the other two men. Now he put his glass down and turned to McCord. He said, "Waiting for Trace?"

McCord said, "I was. I reckon you two'll do just as well, though. You can tell Riordan for me he's not wide enough across the horns to buffalo me yet. After that trick he pulled at Gaylord's last night I'm going to hang his hide on the fence if I have to trail him from here to hell!"

Pete said, "Trace didn't—" and stopped. It was almost possible to see the thoughts working through his deliberate mind. This morning he had had his instructions and knew exactly what to do if Jim McCord wouldn't listen to reason. But this was not morning. It might be best to wait and ask Trace. On the other hand, the head of the organization had been insulted, and their reputation was at stake. Also there was the matter of personal pride.

Pete's decision showed as clearly in his dull eyes as though he had spoken aloud. He pushed himself one step away from the bar. He said, "You talk considerable with your mouth, McCord. Maybe you need a little of what Gaylord got."

Jim knew he had to dispose of Yancy before he tangled with Pete. He turned his gray glance on the yellow-eyed man. He said softly, "You buying into this, Ellis?"

Sweat beaded Yancy's forehead above his pale eyebrows. He was caught in the middle and he straightened nervously. He said, "No, I . . . It isn't my fight. I'll take my—" And his right hand streaked down like a striking hawk for his gun!

In spite of the speed with which he moved, Jim was a split second ahead of him. Jim's right hand was still closed around the bottle he had been holding when the two men had entered the bar, and he brought it around in a short vicious arc that exploded against the side of Yancy's head in a shower of glass and whisky.

Yancy's nerveless hand fell away from his gun and he went down as though he'd been hit with an ax. Pete made a queer animal sound deep in his throat and lunged forward. For all his bulk he moved with surprising speed.

McCord moved aside barely in time to keep from being pinned to the bar by that first rush. He was confident he could handle the big outlaw, but he was going to need room in which to do it. Pete's ponderous weight must top his own hundred and eighty by at least sixty pounds, and Pete was tough. In crowded quarters his great weight would be too much of an advantage.

Pete was moving too fast to stop, and he crashed into the bar with a force that rattled the bottles on the back wall. He roared like a bull and turned to face his enemy.

McCord stepped in just as Pete turned. He hooked his left hand into the big man's unprotected belly, and crossed his right in a vicious smash to the side of the head. In the unnatural stillness of the big room the blows had the flat wet sound of an ax striking a side of beef. Pete simply shook his head and kept coming and McCord knew he was up against as tough a man as he had ever faced.

III

PETE fought with the single-minded purpose of getting his huge hands on his enemy, apparently figuring that any punishment he suffered in the attempt would be more than made up for once he had the other man in his bearlike arms.

Jim moved in between the reaching arms and put everything he had in a savage right handed drive at the thick, unprotected throat. He sank his left hand again in Pete's midriff and crossed another right to the temple and got clear before the huge arms could close around his back.

Pete staggered, hesitated and moved in again, but this time he moved with a caution he had not shown before. His breath was a harsh rasp in his tortured throat, and in his eyes was a dawning doubt and the small beginning of fear.

Jim stepped in to meet him. He beat down Pete's guard with his left hand and landed one hard right and was trying to cross his left when something exploded against the side of his head in a shower of fiery pin-wheels. For a brief moment the room rocked and swayed through a grey mist, and then the floor steadied and his vision cleared and a wave of pure anger rolled over him like a tide. He abandoned all thought of caution and lunged forward, intent only on destroying his enemy and careless of all damage to himself.

Pete met him firmly, and the two men stood flat-footed in the middle of the floor battering at each other with the savage indifference to pain and the vicious energy of a pair of range bulls.

It was Pete who broke first. He stepped suddenly backward and caught the back of a heavy oak chair in one hamlike hand. He picked it off the floor with the ease of a child handling a toy, and brought it around in a wicked arc at McCord's head.

Jim ducked under the wild swing and drove forward. His shoulder smashed into Pete's middle, and his saddle-toughened legs drove harder, carrying the big man back and back with ever increasing momentum until they crashed into the bar with a shattering impact. The edge of the bar caught Pete across the small of the back, and for a brief moment the power deserted his big body.

McCord brought his shoulder up under Pete Kelton's jaw with all the muscle in his body behind it. He slammed his left hand into the man's middle to bring him forward, and hooked his right elbow viciously against the thick jaw. Pete started to slump forward and Jim finished the job by bringing the edge of his closed fist down like a club behind the ear.

Kelton pitched forward onto the rough, unplaned floor. His big body drew into a knot, shuddered once, then relaxed and was still. His breathing was a harsh and labored sound in the sudden stillness.

McCord walked over and stood looking down at the fallen man. Now that the fight was over and the red haze of anger was leaving him he felt a reluctant admiration for his antagonist. Pete had been game. Then Jim remembered what had happened to John Gaylord the night before, and the stricken look on Judy's face. His own face settled into hard lines and he moved back to the bar. He picked up the bottle, poured out a drink, tossed it off and reached into his pocket for money.

The bartender was still sitting on his high stool at the end of the bar, his paper forgotten at his feet. He seemed frozen in a trance. It was broken when McCord reached for his money. He came down off the stool and hurried along the bar. He said quickly, "No. No, friend, I reckon that's on the house!" He wiped off a fine beading of sweat that glistened on his shiny forehead. He said, "I've wished I was big enough to do that job since the first day that critter walked in here and started riding me." He added almost reverently, "I didn't think the man lived who could take both of them!"

McCORD felt a sudden sympathy for the little bartender. He could imagine what the man's life had been like. After the violent anger of the past few minutes a feeling of compassion was a welcome change, and he encouraged it. He gave the man a friendly smile and nodded toward Pete's unconscious form.

He said, "You want to watch him when he comes around. He's likely to be feeling plumb ugly."

The bartender said with a strange earnestness, "No, I'm not afraid of him as I was before. I've seen him lying there like a stuck hog with its throat cut, bleeding all over my floor, and he will know I saw it." He paused and added thoughtfully, "I guess after this he won't get as much fun out of telling me how tough he is."

Jim McCord grinned and turned to go. The grin hurt his face, and he put a hand up to it tenderly. As he went through the door he could hear the little bartender walking toward the back and whistling cheerfully.

The effort required to step into the saddle told McCord that he had taken more of a beating than he had thought. His muscles were beginning to turn sore where Pete's huge fists had battered him, and every move carried with it an accompanying twinge of pain. He turned his horse's head toward home, urging it into a running walk and riding his stirrups to ease the jolt of even that gentle gait.

Riding slowly across the prairie he planned his next move. As soon as Trace returned and found out what had happened trouble would start. The combine had been challenged, and they could not allow the challenge to stand, or other men would be encouraged to try the same thing.

Most probably his horses would be attacked and scattered, and it would be impossible for one man to protect them. McCord straightened decisively and urged his horse to a faster gait, ignoring the pain. His first move was clear. He must get his stock collected in the small pasture near the house where he would have at least a chance of protecting them. True, he would not be able to hold them there long before the pasture would run out, but time would work against Trace, too—every hour he delayed would indicate weakness and lessen the hold through fear that he had upon the other ranchers.

The sun was halfway through its trip across the western sky when Jim McCord rode to the top of the last rise that looked down upon his house. He knew at the first glance that something was wrong, but it was a full minute before it flashed to him what it was. The home pasture stretched as flat as a table behind the corrals—and as empty. The herd of unbroken colts was gone!

For a moment surprise held him motionless. It was impossible that Trace could have discovered what had happened in town and acted so quickly. Then it occurred to him that one of the colts could have broken down the gate and the others followed him to freedom. He gave his mount his head and clattered down the slope.

The gate was open, the gate stick carried back and propped against the fence, a thing that could not possibly have been done accidentally. McCord knew it for what it was—

a sign and a challenge. Whoever had taken his horses wanted him to know that it had been deliberate and not an accident.

He sat his saddle with a tired slump, staring at the open gate, trying to reason the thing out. After the conciliatory answer he had sent Trace this morning, it seemed almost incredible that Trace would have started hostilities before receiving his final word. On the other hand, it would be stretching coincidence too far to attribute his loss to anything but his defiance of the organization. And then he recalled that two other people had known of his decision several hours before the fight—Judy Gaylord, and the big, yellow-headed owner of the Rafter R, Carl Reese!

THE possibility that Judy could be involved never entered Jim's head, but Carl Reese was a different proposition. There had been a spy present at the cattlemen's meeting—as well Carl as anyone. John Gaylord had been hurt—and Carl had showed up early the next morning in time to serve in the admirable rôle of assistant rescuer and messenger of mercy. Either of these things could easily be coincidence, but Carl's knowledge of Jim's intentions and the otherwise unexplainable loss of the colts would be harder to explain. Unless—there was always the chance that Judy had talked with someone else.

McCord sighed and picked up his reins. There was only one way to find out and that was to ask her. He turned his horse's head toward the L 7 and lifted him into a lope.

He dismounted in the Gaylord yard and tied his pony to the hitch-rack, observing with satisfaction that there were no other horses there. He crossed the yard and knocked.

Judy opened the door. At first sight of him her face broke into a smile that changed almost instantly to consternation as she became aware of his battered face.

In a voice scarcely above a whisper, she said, "Not—not you too!"

He grinned at her. The stretching of bruised skin across his face was painful, but he left it there. He said, "I reckon you ought to get a look at Pete."

It slowly dawned on her that he was not seriously hurt, and womanlike, she sought to relieve her shattered nerves by berating him for having frightened her.

She wailed, "It's nothing to joke about! You told me you'd be c-careful!"

He had expected her to be surprised at sight of his face, he had even considered the possibility that she might offer some sympathy—much to be desired—but it had not entered his mind that she would be angry with him. His grin disappeared from his face considerably faster than it had appeared.

He said awkwardly, "I—well, it wasn't anything much. It—just a little kind of a mixup like. I—"

She said fiercely, "Don't you stand there and tell me it wasn't anything! You might have been killed!" The fierceness died out of her eyes and softness replaced it. She put up one hand and touched his face with gentle fingers. She said, "Does it hurt awfully?"

Her sudden change of mood demoralized him completely. He said uncomfortably, "Scarcely any at all," and asked with sudden inspiration, "Is John awake?"

Her hand dropped from his face and she turned partly away, her manner suddenly cool and detached. She said, "No, he's still sleeping. Is that why you came over?"

He said, "No, I wanted to see you."

She turned again to face him. One dark eyebrow went up slightly. She said, "Oh?"

He said, "I wanted to ask you if you'd mentioned to anyone about me deciding to turn Trace down."

Sudden interest showed in her eyes. She said, "Why, no." And then added eagerly, "Why? Have you found out something?"

He told her of the missing colts and the conclusions he had drawn.

"So," he said, "unless you told someone else, Reese is the only one who knew."

She said, "Maybe he mentioned it to someone."

He said incautiously, "Not likely. He'd have more sense than—I mean, he wouldn't—"

She broke in on his fumbling attempts to explain. She said, "So that's what you think

of women! Carl's a man, so you're sure of his intelligence. But I'm a woman, so you have to come riding over here to make sure about me! Jim McCord, I could, I—" Words failed her and she groped helplessly to a stop in sheer frustration.

He retreated hastily before her indignation. "Why, sure, I knew you hadn't said anything. It's only that I had to make plumb *sure* Reese was the only man who knew."

His explanation seemed to mollify her, and once more curiosity got the upper hand. She said, "Are you going to ask him?"

He said, "I reckon not. I've got no proof, and all I'd do would be to put him on his guard."

She persisted, "But what are you going to do?"

He said, "Riordan made a mistake when he brought in Yancy Ellis. Yancy's a top hand with a gun, but outside of that he's not much of a man." He paused, remembering the man's desperate yellow eyes a moment before he'd made that treacherous bid for his gun. He added, "I reckon if I had a few hours alone with Ellis he would tell me some things I need to know."

IV

JUST an hour later, in the dusk of approaching darkness, Jim McCord was once more on the trail to Eagle Butte. He rode a borrowed horse, his own mount taking a much needed rest in the L 7 corrals. He could have used some rest himself, but experience had taught him that it is often the unexpected move that succeeds in a fight, and his enemies would hardly expect him to strike so soon. By tomorrow they would be prepared.

By his side trotted another horse, attached to his saddle-horn by a lead rope. The saddle on the extra mount was empty, but he hoped it would not be for long. If his plans materialized that saddle would soon be filled by an unwilling Yancy Ellis, headed for the hidden brakes in the badlands where he would be asked a series of embarrassing questions.

He dismounted near the edge of town and tied the two horses in a thick clump of young cottonwood trees. He hoped to get his man and get out of town without Yancy's friends being aware of what had happened. It was full dark now, and by staying on the unlighted back streets he could easily reach the small cabin where Yancy lived, without being recognized. He pulled his hat down further over his eyes, checked his gun to see that it was free in the holster, and walked into the little town.

If Yancy had already gone to bed it was going to be tough. With his basically cowardly and suspicious nature, Yancy would sleep behind locked doors with a gun under his pillow; a gun he knew well how to use. It would be impossible to surprise him and dangerous to fool with him, for he was the type of man who would never answer a knock on the door without a cocked gun in his hand.

The cabin was dark when McCord arrived, and it appeared to be deserted. Twice he circled it suspiciously, pausing close under a small window to listen for sounds of breathing. He heard nothing and stepped up onto the porch, his gun in his hand and the hammer eared back. He lifted his left had, rapped three times on the door and moved quickly to one side, the long Colt lifted and ready.

The house remained quiet, dark and silent. After a short wait he knocked again, with the same lack of response. He grinned with satisfaction in the darkness. Apparently Yancy was still uptown, nursing his sore head with a bottle and making up excuses about why he had been defeated so easily.

McCord tried the door, found it locked as he had expected, and walked around the house to the side window. The window, too, was locked, but it was a simple matter to smash the glass with his gun-butt and, reaching inside, unfasten the catch. He raised the sash and slipped his long body through, closing the window behind him.

The cabin's interior was as dark as the inside of a pocket, and he risked a match to orient himself. In the brief yellow light be quickly located and memorized the positions of the cabin's meager furnishings. The table, stove, two chairs, and against the far wall facing the door, Yancy's bunk. The match went out and he dropped it on the littered

floor. He felt his way across the room and sat down on Yancy's bunk. He thought about Yancy's disposition for sudden action, and wondered if the man's nerves could stand the shock he was due to receive. Jim McCord grinned wickedly in the darkness and composed himself to wait.

His wait was not long. He was hardly more than comfortably settled when he heard the sound of steps on the porch and a key fumbled in the lock. He picked up the gun he had placed beside him and waited for the door to open.

The door swung open and Yancy Ellis stood silhouetted against the starlit sky. The man was obviously more than a little drunk. His lean form wavered slightly in the dimness and one hand sought the door-frame for support.

HE MOVED unsteadily inside, kicked the door shut behind him, and started fumbling across the room toward the table. He stumbled over a chair, swore under his breath, then found the table and struck a match. On the table was a kerosene lamp. He touched the match to the wick, replaced the chimney, and still without looking toward his bunk, headed for the stove.

McCord waited until the man was far enough away from the lamp that he could not reach it in a sudden desperate lunge, then said:

"All right, Yancy. That's far enough."

Yancy froze, and this was the moment of danger. With his sudden, unstable nature, he might do anything; collapse, or cry out, or start running, or, worst of all, try for his gun in a false burst of hysterical courage.

The moment passed, and the waiting rancher saw the slight movement of Yancy's shoulders that indicated that the paralysis had worn off and the man was once more capable of rational thought.

He said, "All right, Yancy. Turn around slow, and keep your hand away from your gun."

Yancy came around slowly, his yellow eyes unnaturally bright with combined hate and fear. He eyed Jim McCord sitting calmly on his bunk. With a blustering attempt at the toughness he so much desired, he said:

"Who in hell invited you in?"

Jim ignored him, said, "Unbuckle your gunbelt. One hand. Slow." At the same time he raised the muzzle of his own gun until it was centered squarely between the wild yellow eyes.

Yancy did as he was told. The belt thudded to the floor. He dropped his eyes to it, then looked hastily back at McCord.

Jim McCord stood up. He said, "Turn around and start walking, Ellis. We're going for a little ride."

In a last attempt at defiance Yancy stayed where he was. In his eyes was the opaque, glassy sheen of approaching hysteria, but he didn't move. He tried to make his voice tough and assured but it came out a whining snarl. He said, "I'm not going anywhere!"

McCord was beside the man in two quick strides. He leaned forward until his cold grey eyes were only inches from the staring yellow ones. He said, "Now get this Yancy, and get it straight. You're going with me—one way or another. You can do the job walking on your own hind legs, or you can do it draped over my shoulder with a hole in you, but you're going. Now take your pick, and be damn sudden about it!"

Yancy's bluff was called, and he lacked the courage to see it through to a finish. He turned around and started walking. With that surrender his will to resist deserted him, and he made the trip out through the dark streets with no more rebellion. It was only when they came to the horses that he offered any resistance at all, and then it was weak, hopeless even in his own eyes. He climbed reluctantly into saddle and permitted his wrists to be tied to the horn.

It was nearing midnight when the two men rode into the McCord ranch yard. Yancy had maintained a stubborn silence throughout the ride, and Jim, realizing that unenlightening silence would be harder on the man's nerves than threatening talk, had been quiet, too.

Leaving the lead rope still snubbed to his saddle-horn, he dismounted and dropped his reins over the tie-rack. He checked Yancy's bonds briefly, then went into the house. The flare of a match showed through the open door, then he reappeared with a light coil of

soft-twist rope and a short hatchet. He tied them to the saddle strings behind his cantle and stepped onto his horse. With the led horse trailing, and still without saying a word, he set off at a brisk trot toward the badlands that bordered his ranch on the west.

YANCY stood it for about a mile, then his rising apprehension got the better of him. In a voice that he tried to make casual he asked, "What's the idea of the rope and hatchet?" His voice sounded rusty.

McCord grinned in the darkness. The man's imagination was working, undermining what little nerve he had left. He said cheerfully, "Don't get impatient. You'll find out soon enough."

Another two miles brought them to a deep, well-concealed dry-wash far back in the badlands. McCord knew the place from past stock-hunting excursions, and he knew that there he would find the three things he needed—privacy, dead buffalo-berry bushes, and a large hill of vicious red prairie ants.

He dismounted in the bottom of the draw. Leaving the horses standing, with Yancy still tied in the saddle, he went about building a fire. He got the fire burning briskly, lighting up the eroded walls of the wash and giving light enough to work by, then he went back to the horses. He untied the loop that held Yancy's hands to the saddle-horn, but he left the hands tied together.

He said, "All right, get down off that pony."

Yancy got down, awkwardly, because of his bound hands. Though the night was cool the firelight reflected from beads of sweat on his forehead, and his yellow eyes shifted constantly.

Jim McCord untied the rope and hatchet from the back of his saddle. He said curtly, "Get over by the fire and sit down."

Yancy walked woodenly to the fire and sat down.

McCord crossed over and squatted on his heels on the other side, where he could watch Yancy's face in the flickering light. He laid the hatchet and rope down beside him and built a smoke. He lit it with a burning branch from the fire and turned his gray glance on Yancy.

He said, "Now, friend, you're going to tell me some things I want to know."

Across the fire Yancy's yellow eyes had a glazed sheen, and his face was oily with fear. But stronger than his fear of present hurt was his knowledge of what happened to rustlers. If he talked he would be signing his own death warrant. He had to swallow twice before he could speak. He said,

"I—I've got nothing to tell."

McCord sighed. He took a long drag on his cigarette and let the smoke trickle lazily from his nostrils. He seemed neither surprised nor angered by Yancy's answer.

Presently he said, "Well, I reckon it's just as well. You'll be more likely to tell the truth in the morning anyway." He took another drag on his smoke and inquired conversationally, "Ever see a man staked out, Yancy?"

For a brief moment Yancy's hopes had risen at thought of a day of grace, only to be dashed lower than ever at this new threat of unknown terror. His mouth opened and his breathing was shallow and rapid. He shook his head dumbly.

McCord said casually, "Well, it don't amount to a hell of a lot. You drive in four pickets and spread-eagle a man on his back, with his arms and legs tied to the stakes." He paused a moment, then nodded toward the edge of light cast by the fire. "You spread him over an anthill like that one there."

V

YANCY'S eyes followed those of the rancher who was taunting him to the flattened, circular mound just within the circle of light. He studied it with the hypnotized stare of a bird watching a snake. He shuddered and dropped his eyes. For a long moment he stared at the ground in front of him, then he raised his wild yellow eyes. When he spoke his voice was a dry rasp, scarcely above a whisper.

He said, "That's Injun, McCord. White men don't use torture! I . . . You wouldn't do that!"

McCord ignored the outburst completely. He went on talking as calmly as though discussing the price of beef. He said, "I never

saw it done myself, but I knew a man down Arizona way who had been through it. Apaches done it. Poor devil was crazy. Didn't mind talking about it though; fact, he wouldn't talk about anything else. Biggest thing that ever happened to him, I reckon." He paused and flipped his cigarette into the fire, adding casually, "Man was blind, too. Seems them red ants go for a man's eyes more than anything else."

Across the fire Yancy seemed to have shrunken into himself. His eyes were glazed and his mouth worked, but no sound came out.

McCord picked up the hatchet and rose. He said, "Well, I reckon by tomorrow noon you'll know more about it than I can tell you."

Yancy whispered, "That's Injun, McCord! You wouldn't do that!" He repeated half hysterically, as though repetition would make it a fact, "You wouldn't do that!"

McCord's voice was suddenly like a whip. He said, "Remember young Johnny Haines? He died the first night of the raid on Rafter S beef! Remember old Ben Hawley? He got his when the L 7 stacks were burned!" His gray eyes were as cold as a winter lake. He said, "Don't be too sure of what I wouldn't do."

Looking into Jim McCord's eyes Yancy seemed to lose all hope. He said tonelessly, "They'll hang me."

McCord said, "Maybe, maybe not. That's a chance you'll have to take. You can talk now, or you can wait till I show up tomorrow when you'll be damn glad of the chance! Take your pick, but do it sudden. I'm plumb fed up with fooling around."

Yancy said hopelessly, "What do you want to know?"

McCord said, "First off, who's top dog in the outfit?"

Yancy said dully, "Carl Reese. Trace gets his orders from him."

"That makes four—Carl, Trace, Pete and you. Anyone else?"

"No, just four of us. Carl held the beef from those first raids in a canyon in the mountains west of his place. Later he turned them over to three men from west of the Divide. I never did know their names."

"Is that where he's holding those ponies of mine he run off?"

Yancy said sullenly, "I don't know. You damn well know I wasn't there. I reckon Carl done it himself with maybe Trace helping. I haven't seen either one of them since."

The rustler's captor asked, "This canyon you mentioned—where's it located?"

"In the mountains west of Reese's Rafter R. You know where White Horse Canyon opens out on the Cheyenne?" McCord nodded and Yancy explained, "Well, about a mile and a half up White Horse you come to a little creek flowing from a draw leading in from the north. You follow that creek up for a mile or so and it opens up into wide bottoms. That's where Carl held them cows. Likely it's where he took your ponies, too."

With a sudden change in direction, Jim McCord said, "How does it happen Reese decided all at once to tackle me? He was at the meeting, and he knew I was going to stay out of it."

NOW that the immediate threat of physical danger was past, Yancy's spirits were reviving. He almost managed a leer. He said, "Reese said he was going to make you join because the other ranchers were getting notions that maybe they could get away with refusing, too. But Trace told me and Pete private that he reckoned Carl was trying to cut you down to size in the eyes of the girl."

McCord said, "Girl?"

"Judy Gaylord. Carl's plumb lost his head over her."

Jim McCord came around the fire. He had found out what he needed to know and there was no longer any necessity for delay. He said, "Back on that pony, Yancy. We're going for another ride."

Yancy walked to the horse and climbed on awkwardly. He waited while his hands were once more tied to the horn. Then he said, "You taking me in to the law?"

The rancher stepped into saddle and picked up the lead rope. He said, "Young Johnny Haines, the kid who was killed on that Rafter S raid, was one of Frank Sears' top hands. I'm taking you to Sears' place. Could be I'll be needing some more answers out of

you, and Sears and his boys would be just the outfit to help me refresh your memory."

He picked up his horse's head and started south through the badlands, toward the headquarters of the Rafter S.

By the time he drew rein in the Rafter S ranch yard, Jim McCord was fighting to keep from going to sleep in the saddle. The punishment he had taken from Pete's huge fists had been more severe than he had realized, and the almost constant hours in the saddle since then had allowed his body little opportunity to recuperate.

He sat his saddle looking at the darkened ranch house, then called out in the immemorial custom of a man with friendly intentions arriving at night in a strange camp:

"Hello, the house!"

Almost as though his call had been expected, the yellow glow of a lamp appeared in one of the windows and as instantly Frank Sears' tall, slat-thin shape showed in the doorway.

He stood peering out into the night, trying to penetrate the darkness. He said, "Can't see you out there. Who is it?"

"Jim McCord, Sears. I've got something out here might interest you."

Frank Sears came off the porch, moving toward the dark shapes of the horses. His voice was curious, with a trace of suspicion.

He said, "Kind of late in the afternoon to be trotting around with curiosities, wouldn't you say?"

McCord laughed shortly and stepped down from saddle. He said, "Never too late for this kind, Frank. This fellow tells the most interesting damn stories."

By this time Sears was close enough to identify Yancy. He waited silently while the man's hands were untied from the horn and he was ordered down from his horse.

Then he said quietly, "So something broke, did it? Good. Bring him into the house. I like to see a man's eyes when he tells me stories."

He started back to the house. McCord followed, prodding Yancy along ahead of him.

In the lamplit living room, Sears indicated chairs with a nod of his head. He said, "All right, let's have it."

Jim McCord gave him a quick summary of what had happened since the meeting closed the night before. He ended up, "So I brought him here. It was that or take him in to Sheriff Macklin, and I reckon once he got behind the protection of the law he'd deny everything and clam up. This way we've got him handy if we need more information." He added pleasantly, "If his memory turns bad we can always take him back to that anthill."

Frank Sears turned his gaze on Yancy, and his eyes held no trace of mercy. He said, "Remembering Johnny Haines, it'll be a pleasure. I've got a few questions I'd admire to hear answered myself."

McCORD said, "Later, Frank. Right now I could use some help. You got anybody here with you?"

"Just Tom Harmon. The other boys are down at the south end, camped on the Manila."

McCord said, "All right. How about sending Harmon into town after Macklin?"

"I thought you said you were going to keep the law out of it."

"Tell Harmon not to mention Yancy. Have Harmon tell him that I've had some ponies stolen and I think I know where they are. Say I'd appreciate it if he'd come out alone, and help me check."

"You staying here?"

"I've got to get some sleep. We'd have to come through this way anyhow, and by having Macklin meet me here I can save several hours of riding. It's no farther for him."

Sears said, "You're calling the game. Anything else?"

"Well," McCord said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd take Yancy out to the bunkhouse or somewhere where Macklin won't spot him and tie him up. If it's not too much trouble, you might look in on him off and on to see he don't get loose. I'd hate to have him warn Reese before I could get moving."

Sears stood up. He said, "He won't get away." He motioned Yancy to his feet and added to McCord, "Sure you don't want help? Time I get this whelp tied up I could ride over to the Manilla and get the boys."

McCord shook his head. "No, I've got a chance of getting in there with Macklin and finding out a few things before Reese gets wise to it. I try going in there with a crowd and Reese is going to know it. He'll cut his string and we'll be right back where we started. No proof."

Sears said, "Well, it's your neck," and prodded Yancy toward the door. He paused in the doorway for a final word. "I'll get Harmon started soon as I get this one tied. Tom ought to be back with Macklin along about eight or nine in the mornnig." Without waiting for an answer he went on outside, still prodding Yancy along ahead of him.

Jim walked over to the horse-hide-covered couch beside the fireplace. He stretched out on his back and rested his head on a folded blanket at one end. He intended to stay awake for awhile and plan the next morning's attack, but his tired body refused to cooperate. He was asleep almost before his head touched the blanket. . . .

At ten o'clock the next morning Jim McCord and Sheriff Ben Macklin rode into a shallow ford of the Cheyenne, just opposite the place where White Horse Canyon opened out on the river bottoms. In the middle of the river they paused and slacked their reins to let their horses drink.

Sheriff Macklin was not in a good humor. He was not as young as he once had been, and was developing a heaviness about the middle that did not go well with long hours in the saddle. He had been aroused from his comfortable bed in the small hours of the morning and hurried away with such urgency that he had not even had time for a cup of coffee. Since then he had had his coffee, but the young man he was now riding with was singularly uncommunicative. The sheriff felt he had not been told all the facts. He stayed with the job because he was a conscientious man, and the recovery of stolen stock was his duty. But he was not happy.

VI

AS THE sheriff sat his saddle in the middle of the river and watched his horse's ears twitch in rhythm with its swallowing, he resumed the argument that had been going on intermittently since the two men had ridden away from the Rafter S.

He said, "I still don't see why Yancy told all this to you instead of coming to me."

"Well," McCord said, "I'm the man who lost the horses."

"But why didn't you hold him till I had a chance to talk to him?"

McCord said evasively, "I reckon he'll be around when you need him. Meantime we can find out if he was telling the truth about those ponies. If they're where he said they'd be, likely the rest of his story's true, too."

The sheriff said querulously, "Maybe, but it will be no proof. You'd have one hell of a time proving Reese did it. Maybe they just drifted."

Jim McCord said, "If Reese figures to hold them horses in that canyon he's going to have to ride over at least once a day and push them back from the outlet. If he doesn't they'll start to drift toward their home range. All we've got to do is hide out in the brush and wait till he starts moving them back. That ought to be evidence enough."

Their horses finished their drinking, raised their heads, and the two men rode on across the river, the gray-haired sheriff complaining as they went, "So I'm to set out in that bug-ridden brush all day with nothing to eat, just because you got a wild idea. By hell, I got a good notion not to do it!"

Riding ahead, with his back to the older man, Jim McCord grinned. He knew the sheriff was far too conscientious an officer to fail in his duty because of discomfort.

A mile and a half up the canyon, as Yancy had said, a small stream flowed into White Horse. It issued from a narrow, steep-sided canyon, the walls of which were so close together that there was room for only one rider at a time on the narrow, rocky path that bordered the creek along the winding bottom.

It was a perfect spot for an ambush, and McCord felt the muscles across his shoulders tighten as he rode in between the confining walls. Time was too short, however, to permit searching for another route into the hidden valley, so he kept going, half-expecting to run into trouble at every turn in the trail.

The canyon twisted steadily northward for a little more than a mile, and then, to McCord's relief, he rounded the last bend and saw the country open up ahead of him. The steep rock walls came to an abrupt end, opening out into a high mountain meadow, studded with clumps of aspen and willow and an occasional tall spruce tree. The horse rancher urged his horse to a faster gait and rode out from between the frowning walls.

As he rode out into the open and reined to a halt, his eyes swept the country before him. At the far end of the basin—a matter of three or four miles—there was another outlet, easily identifiable by the V-shaped break in the surrounding rimrock. Loose horses were grazing among the scattered clumps of trees in the basin's bottom. They were too far away to be identified, but they were almost certainly the bunch he was seeking. He had touched his mount lightly with his spurs to ride down and investigate when a single rider burst suddenly from the trees below him, riding hell-for-leather toward the V-shaped opening at the far end of the basin.

Almost without thinking, McCord lifted his own mount into a high run and slammed forward, instinctively trying to cut off the escape of the fleeing rider. Above the thunder of his horse's hooves he was dimly aware of Sheriff Macklin's shout behind him, and then of the heavy report of a large-caliber rifle opening up from the trees on his right. He had barely time to regret his hasty action when the rifle crashed a second time and he felt his horse stumble and break in the forequarters. He tried desperately to get clear in time, but his mount went over in a pinwheeling somersault. He saw the dark trunk of a spruce rushing toward him and the next instant he was plunged into roaring, flame-shot pit of purple darkness. . . .

SOME while later he was conscious first of a nagging pain that centered in his eyes. The pain was caused by a red light shining in his face, and he wanted to turn his head to avoid it. But some caution, deeper than conscious thought, kept him motionless. As his mind grew clearer, he realized that the red light was the sun shining through his closed eyelids. He became aware that he was lying on his side in the bright sunlight, and for a moment this puzzled him. Then memory returned and he recalled the fleeing rider, the shots from the trees, and the feel of his horse going down under him the moment before darkness claimed him.

He could hear voices raised in argument somewhere in front of him, could hear what was being said, but the voices were too indistinct for him to recognize the speakers. He let his eyelids open to thin slits, through which he could peer at the scene before him.

Thirty feet from where Jim McCord lay a small, wiry, hard-faced man squatted on his heels at the base of a spruce tree. The man was hardly larger than a good-sized boy, but even in a relaxed pose his compact body radiated a powerful energy. Like a mountain lion crouched above a deer trail, he was motionless with a stillness that threatened at any moment to break into violent and savage action. Trace Riordan, chief gunman under Carl Reese!

Standing beside Riordan in sullen silence was the hulking form of Pete Kelton, and facing the two was Carl Reese.

Reese was doing the talking. His blue eyes were like chips of glacier ice, and his handsome face was pale with fury as he said:

"You fools! If you could keep it in your trigger-happy minds for five minutes who's running this show we'd have been all right! But no! You have to cut and run for it, and then make a bad mistake worse by trying to shoot your way out of it like a pair of grandstanding schoolboys! You've ruined as pretty a setup as you're ever likely to see!"

Trace Riordan glanced up from the corner of his tense, restless eyes. "That's putting her a little strong Carl. She ain't ruined yet."

Reese said passionately, "Ain't ruined yet! Where in hell's that thing you call a mind, Trace? I suppose all we've got to do is get rid of McCord and the sheriff and everything's fine again!"

Trace said calmly, "Don't see why not. Nobody's seen what happened."

Reese said sarcastically, "And how about Yancy? How do you reckon these two found their way in here? By now the whole damned country probably knows about it!"

Trace said, "You're letting your temper run off with your judgment, Carl." He nodded briefly at Jim McCord's prone figure. "That one there's a curly wolf from the forks of the creek. Them kind hunt alone. You can figure he's the boy that went in after Yancy, and you can figure he didn't call in help to make Yancy talk."

Reese's voice was still heavy with sarcasm. "And you think he kept what Yancy told him quiet?"

Trace shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. He's the kind that likes to kill his own snakes."

Reese digested that for a long moment before he answered. "Then you think he's got Yancy hid out somewheres, and if we get to him before he talks any more, we can still bluff it out?" He straightened his shoulders with sudden decisiveness. "All right. I guess it's cut our string without trying or give it a whirl. We haven't got much time."

Trace Riordan came to his feet with the fluid, effortless grace of a cat. He said, "I reckon the fastest way is to make McCord talk. We're not likely to get much done charging around blind."

REESE glanced at Jim McCord's apparently unconscious form and then back at Trace. He said thoughtfully, "With a man like McCord that could take some time. How about the money we've got cached in town?"

Instantly Trace's body was taut as a strung wire. "All right, what about it?"

Reese said casually, "I reckon I'd better ride in and pick it up, just in case Yancy has talked more than we think. It might be hard to get at later on."

Trace studied Carl Reese for a long moment, then his hard face broke into a grin. He said, "I'll just ride along in with you. Pete can take care of McCord without help."

Carl's big body stiffened, and he seemed about to break out in an angry retort. Then he relaxed and said mildly, "Suit yourself." He said to Pete, "You know what you're supposed to do?"

Pete said sullenly, "Make the big feller talk."

"And then?"

"And then get rid of them both."

Reese said patiently, "How?"

Pete's heavy brow furrowed in concentration. Then he brightened. He said, "Shoot 'em and bury 'em under the rim."

Trace laughed briefly. He said, "He seems to have the general idea. Let's get a move on." He started toward his horse.

Reese followed more slowly. He stopped once and looked back at Pete, indecision plain on his face. Finally in the saddle he glanced back hesitantly at Pete once more, then with sudden decision wheeled his mount and followed Riordan into the narrow-walled canyon.

Through slitted eyelids Jim McCord watched the two riders vanish into the canyon. His numbed brain had cleared rapidly while the three outlaws had been arguing, and while his head still throbbed with a nagging persistence, his mind was functioning rapidly and efficiently.

Pete Kelton turned and started toward him and he closed his eyes. If he could maintain the illusion of unconsciousness until the right moment there was a chance that he might surprise his huge captor and gain the upper hand.

Footsteps stopped beside him and he concentrated on lying relaxed and apparently unconscious. He heard Pete mutter something then the toe of Pete's boot crashed into his side. The unexpectedness of it almost brought an involuntary gasp at the sudden searing pain, but the rancher caught himself in time and remained limp and unresisting.

Kelton said viciously, "Think you're a hard one, don't you? Well, by hell, you got to wake up some time and I'm going to find out how tough you are!" He started walking toward his horse.

At the sound of receding footsteps McCord opened his eyes again. The pain in his side was like a hot, twisting knife thrust into his vitals, and he felt such a violent hatred for the man who had caused it that it threatened to cloud his thinking and interfere with a clear-headed plan for escape.

Pete Kelton's carelessness in turning his back had presented him with an opportunity to orient himself, and he raised himself cautiously but quickly on one elbow. There was a sharp sound of indrawn breath behind him, and turning his head quickly, he found him-

self looking into the incredulous eyes of Sheriff Ben Macklin.

The old sheriff was sitting with his back propped against a tree, hands tied behind it. One leg was stretched stiffly in front of him, and a few inches above the knee the trousers were stained with the dark, oily shine of blood. In rapid succession the lawman's eyes registered surprise, disbelief, dawning hope, and then strangely, a sort of grim humor—as though he were already seeing and enjoying an unpleasant surprise coming to Pete Kelton.

McCORD had time only to risk a quick nod before turning his attention back to Pete. Even then he was none too soon. Pete had reached his horse and was turning around to check on his prisoners. McCord barely had time to drop back on the ground in his former position.

For a long, uncomfortable moment, Pete stared at him, as though some half-seen movement had aroused his suspicion. Then, apparently satisfied, he turned back to his horse and began unfastening his rope.

Jim McCord wanted to wait until Carl and Trace were unquestionably beyond hearing before making his bid, but evidently Pete's slow mind had come to the conclusion that it would be safer to tie his dangerous prisoner before he regained consciousness.

The heavy sound of Pete's approach came to a halt, and every nerve in McCord's body tightened in anticipation. There was a brief silence, then the soft sound of the rope dropping to the ground. As Pete's huge hand closed on the rancher's wrist, his prisoner moved with the speed of a striking rattler.

He twisted his arm out of the unprepared Pete's casual grasp, and at the same time brought his other hand over and caught his opponent's huge forearm in both hands. In almost the same motion he twisted over in a violent half-roll, striving desperately to throw the rustler across his body and into the rocky ground beyond. His effort was successful, and the shouted encouragement of the excited old sheriff blended with Pete's outraged bellow of surprise.

Jim McCord came to his feet with the agility of a cat and launched himself at his prostrate enemy. He had to keep Pete too busy and confused to use his gun or the fight would be over before it was fairly started. Pete was swaying to his knees, one hand already sweeping up from his holster with a cocked .45, when Jim McCord slammed into him.

VII

CATCHING Pete's thick wrist with both hands Jim McCord bore down with all his weight, smashing Pete's hand against the rocky ground in an attempt to break his hold on the gun. Pete's free hand was battering at Jim's already bruised head and he wanted desperately to release the gun and protect himself, but to let go of the gun was death, and he knew it. He could only hang on grimly and take advantage of every chance to loosen Pete Kelton's powerful grip.

It seemed to McCord that the rhythmic pounding against the side of his head had been going on since the beginning of time. In a detached but oddly lucid manner, he was aware that his mind was going under again, and that he would have to do something about it soon or it would be too late. With a sudden shift in tactics he let go of Pete's wrist with one hand and caught the barrel of the gun, forcing it inward and upward in at last desperate bid to twist it from Pete's grasp.

He felt the gun loosen slightly and exerted more pressure. There was a thunderous, muffled roar, powder stung his fingers, and he was suddenly aware that Pete's grip had relaxed and that he himself was in possession of the gun.

For a few moments his dazed brain refused to register what had happened. Then it gradually came to him that the battering against his head had ceased, the disputed gun was in his hand, and his powerful opponent was lying limp and motionless on the rocky ground. He stood up with the gun hanging loosely in his grip and passed a hand across his dazed eyes.

Behind him Sheriff Macklin said enthusiastically, "Hell, boy, that was worth the price of admission! You're sure one ring-tailed hellion in a brawl!"

McCord didn't answer. His battered brain was clearing, and he suddenly remembered Carl and Trace. He turned his head toward the mouth of the canyon. Had they heard that muffled shot? There was no way to find out but to wait and see. Thrusting the gun into his empty holster, he dropped to one knee beside Pete Kelton.

One quick look told him all he needed to know. The single bullet, fired by Pete's own hand, had gone in one side six inches below the armpit and ranged diagonally upward. Pete must have been dead almost before his hand relaxed its grip on the gun.

McCord straightened and turned toward the sheriff. Freeing the lawman's hands, Jim saw the question in Macklin's eyes and shrugged.

He said, "I reckon it wasn't his day to howl." He nodded at the sheriff's leg and said briefly, "Bad?"

Ben Macklin glanced down at his outstretched leg. "Missed the bone," he said. "Guess I'll live."

McCord said, "How'd it happen? My memory turned bad after I met that tree."

Macklin said wryly, "I must be getting old. When Trace opened up on you I tried to get in behind them rocks at the mouth of the canyon and cover for you. Carl knocked a leg out from under me before I was more than started."

McCord asked, "Can you ride?"

"You give me a hand into the saddle and I'll ride."

Jim McCord said briefly, "I'll get the horses," and turned away.

Half an hour later, Sheriff Ben Macklin and Jim McCord once more splashed into the shallow ford of the Cheyenne. The old sheriff rode humped over the saddle, both hands clutching the horn. Fine beads of moisture glistened on his pale face, and his mouth was set in a tight line of pain.

McCord rode at the older man's side, watching closely for any signs of sudden collapse. The horse rancher rode the big roan gelding that had belonged to Pete Kelton—his own mount lying dead beside a spruce tree in the hidden valley. On the far side of the river he pulled a little to the right, angling slightly south of the direct route.

BEN MACKLIN followed for several hundred yards before his pain-wracked mind became aware of the change in course. He straightened in the saddle and said half suspiciously, "Where you headed?"

McCord said casually, "Gaylord's place. It's closer than town."

"What about Riordan and Reese?"

"I reckon I can take care of Trace and Carl."

The old sheriff drew his horse to an abrupt stop. He said stubbornly, "That's my job. I'm going with you."

McCord said reasonably, "Use your head, Sheriff. You can't walk, let alone tangle with that pair." When the sheriff remained stubbornly silent he added, "We stand here arguing about it much longer and they'll be gone before either one of us gets a crack at them."

Ben Macklin surrendered reluctantly, but he surrendered. He knew the necessity for haste as well as McCord did, and without another word he picked up his reins and followed the young rancher across the rolling prairie.

When the two men rode into the yard Judy Gaylord was standing on the front porch. She came down the steps and hurried toward them. Her eyes widened at sight of the fresh bruises on McCord's face and then moved swiftly to the sick face of the old sheriff and down to his blood-soaked pants leg.

She asked breathlessly, "Is it—bad?"

Jim McCord said, "He'll be all right by the time he gets some rest. I reckon he's seen about all he needs of that saddle."

She said, "Of course, I—" and moved quickly forward to help with the barely conscious wounded man.

Between them they got the sheriff into the house and into a bed in the room adjoining John Gaylord's. McCord wasted a moment staring down at the lawman's relaxed body, then went back out into the hall, motioning to Judy to follow him.

He closed the door carefully behind her and said reassuringly, "He'll be all right. He's just plumb played out."

She whispered, "What happened?"

He said, "Haven't got time to tell you now. Got to get to town. I—" He paused briefly, and added with sudden inspiration,

"Got to get Doc Marsden."

She followed him down the hall, saying persistently, "It was Carl, wasn't it?"

He said shortly, "It was Carl."

With sudden realization she said, "And you're going in after him!"

He said evasively, "Might see him about." He expected her to argue about it, and he found himself feeling relieved and yet not a little disappointed when she said nothing, but followed him out of the house and across the yard to his waiting horse.

When he had stepped into the saddle she laid a slim hand on the hard brown one resting on the pommel.

She said, "I know it's no use arguing, Jim, when your pride is involved, and I'll not make your job harder by trying. But—come back!" Her voice broke slightly and she shook her head with an impatient, rebellious gesture, and repeated almost fiercely, "See that you come back!"

Her hand dropped to her side, releasing him, and he picked up his mount's head.

He said with complete conviction, "I'll be back," and, pivoting the big roan, lifted him into a run out of the yard. He did not look back, and so did not see the half-uplifted hand, or hear the involuntary cry that was suppressed to an agonized whisper. "Wait! . . . Oh, wait!"

FOR the second time within twenty-four hours Jim McCord rode down the dusty street of Eagle Butte with trouble on his mind. The blazing red ball of the sun had disappeared behind the western hills, and the town was beginning to come alive in the gathering coolness of early dusk.

Horses and rigs were already tied at the long hitch-racks, and more were coming in steadily. McCord welcomed the presence of other riders and the lengthening shadows to make his own arrival less conspicuous. He dismounted in front of the Buckhorn Bar and, dropping his reins over the hitch-rack, stepped up onto the board walk.

The Buckhorn Bar was beginning to fill up. Two tables at the rear of the big room were already surrounded by men too impatient to wait longer for their nightly session of poker. The long bar itself was lined for two-thirds of its length with thirsty townsmen and riders in from the range.

Jim McCord paused just within the batwing doors and let his eyes drift over the crowd. Neither of the men he sought were present, but behind the bar was the small bartender who had so admired his defeat of Yancy Ellis and Pete Kelton the day before.

McCord moved to the unoccupied end of the bar, where he could talk without being overheard, and when the small bartender hurried over he asked casually, "Seen anything of Trace today?"

The little man said, "Sure thing." He bobbed his head to indicate the stairs at the back of the room. "He's up in his room. Want I should tell him you're looking for him?"

McCord shook his head. "No, reckon I'd rather surprise him. Anybody with him?"

The little man frowned. "Now that's a curious thing. That big blond feller, Reese, is with him. And I thought Trace was plumb unpopular with the cattlemen."

McCord grinned. "You stay around a bit and you'll likely see something more curious than that. If Reese is—" He broke off abruptly, murmuring, "Keep your head down, friend," and moved unobtrusively but quickly into the concealing pack of men farther along the bar.

For a moment the little barkeeper was puzzled by that abrupt departure, then he saw the reason for it. Coming down the back stairs were two men they had been discussing—Trace Riordan and Carl Reese.

Mingled with the partially concealing crowd, Jim McCord watched with a growing tenseness as Trace and Carl descended the stairs. It did not occur to him to take advantage of his foreknowledge, to draw his gun and even the odds against him, any more than he had earlier thought to enlist aid in the lawful and commendable purpose of arresting two outlaws wanted by the sheriff. He lived by the code that every man killed his own snakes, and his pride was more precious than life itself.

The two men reached the bottom of the stairs and started across the open center of the room toward the door. When they were nearly even with Jim McCord he pushed

away from the bar and stepped into the open. In a voice that was not loud, but that carried clearly throughout the big room, he said:

"Reese!"

Reese halted in midstride. For a brief moment his eyes held the incredulous look of a man staring at the impossible. Then a veil slid over the blue eyes and he leaned slightly forward. His right hand opened slowly and the leather saddle-bags he carried dropped to the floor with a muted thud.

Trace Riordan came to a halt on Reese's left. He had betrayed no surprise when McCord had spoken, and he showed none now—only a vast curiosity and a reckless impatience. He twisted his head to look up at his big blond companion with the eager anticipation of terrier awaiting the word to strike.

CARL REESE looked steadily at McCord for a long minute, then said idly, as though it were a matter of only casual interest:

"So Pete fouled it up. I had a notion he might."

Just as casually McCord said, "Small man for a big job, Carl. He couldn't cut it."

Unexpectedly Trace said, "I can!" and his hand moved like the head of a striking snake.

At almost the same instant, as though by prearrangement, Carl Reese made his try. He dropped off to the right to spread the target, and his hand was a pale blur that swept past his holster—almost unbelievably acquiring a long, black pointing finger.

To the astonished crowd that watched, Jim McCord's draw was too fast for the eye to follow. One moment his hands hung at his sides, limp and relaxed. The next instant a hand was at waist level, incredibly holding a heavy Colt, with a bursting orange flower at the muzzle that bloomed in a thunderous cataclysm of sound.

Trace Riordan had just cleared his gun of the holster when the first bullet hit him. The heavy slug caught him squarely in the center of the chest and his wiry body jerked under the impact. The gun slid from his suddenly nerveless fingers and his body broke at the knees. As he fell the wicked tension in his face was replaced by a look of total disbelief, an absolute refusal to accept what was happening to him.

Even as the Colt's recoil slammed back against his palm, Jim McCord knew he had chosen the lesser man; that despite the instant's delay in drawing, Reese was the faster of his two opponents. He brought his gun around in a desperate attempt to beat the big blond man to the first shot.

The heavy Colt bucked and roared in his hand, and at almost the same instant he saw the bursting, black-shot blossom of flame at the muzzle of Reese's gun. He had hurried the shot and missed, but the bullet had broken Reese's aim.

He caught the hammer under his thumb at the top of the gun's recoil, and this time when he let the hammer slip he felt the gun slam back against his palm and saw the tiny spurt of dust beside Carl's shirt pocket where the bullet had hit.

Reese's big body jerked, and his downswinging gun dropped too far and drove its charge of fire and lead into the splintered floor. He tried to bring the gun up again, but his strength failed him and he came down to his knees. He swayed there for a moment, kept erect by sheer force of will, then his muscles betrayed him and he slipped forward and came to rest lying on his side.

Jim McCord let the long black Colt sag to his side, and in the hushed silence walked over to stand beside his fallen enemy. When he saw the blue eyes open he said quietly, "I reckon it wasn't your day, Carl."

Reese brought his dying gaze to focus on the man before him. The sly deceptiveness was gone from his eyes, and in their depths was only the failing end of a bright blue flame. A thin trickle of blood drifted from the corner of his mouth and stained the rough floor beside the bright golden head. He drew a deep breath.

He said, "Trace—said you were a—curly wolf! I didn't—think you—could—"

The blue eyes lost interest suddenly, his big body relaxed, and he was dead.

Jim McCord walked back to the bar. The big room was dead quiet, with the unnatural stillness of men who fear the centering of attention on them in a dangerous situation.

He stopped across the bar from the little bartender. He said, "Get Doc Marsden."

His voice sounded harsh even in his own ears.

IN A half hysterical attempt at humor the little man said, "Doctor! Hell, they don't need no doctor! What they need is a—" He broke off in sudden confusion.

McCord said, "Sheriff Macklin's out to Gaylord's with a hole in him. Get Marsden and his buggy. I'm going out with him."

The little man wasted no more words. He gave the horse rancher one startled glance, hurried around the end of the bar, and out into the darkness.

A bottle stood before Jim McCord on the bar and he reached for it and tipped it up. Behind him he heard the beginning rustle of movement, and an occasional low-pitched voice. The sound of voices grew stronger, but no one tried to speak to him, and he thought, That is the way it will be. They thought you were a gunman before, and now they know it.

Their use for you is gone.

In sudden disgust he put the bottle down and walked out of the death-filled room, to stand on the edge of the board walk under the clean sky and wait for the doctor.

The buggy rattled up the street and Jim McCord stepped down from the walk. He waited in the street until the buggy drew up beside him and the little bartender jumped down.

Jim nodded briefly toward his horse and said, "Have somebody take the roan back to the livery stable. He belonged to Pete Kelton."

The little man said excitedly, "Belonged! Is Pete—"

McCord said shortly, "Yes," and stepped up into the buggy beside the doctor.

The doctor was an old man whose eyes had seen many things. He glanced once at Jim McCord's face, slapped the lines against the off horse's back, and drove quickly out of town.

They were a mile out of town before either man spoke. Then the old doctor observed mildly, "I understand you're a skillful man with a gun."

McCord said shortly, "Yes," and kept his eyes fixed on the road.

The doctor said, "Fine thing for the country, when they need it."

McCord said bitterly, "Not so fine when they don't."

The old doctor glanced at the rancher's face from the corner of shrewd eyes. He said, "A hard way to earn it I'll grant, but you'll have the people's gratitude."

Jim McCord laughed and the sound was not pleasant.

He said, "Their gratitude mebbe. Not their company."

The doctor said thoughtfully, "You'll have their company, too—when you let them know you want it." He was silent for another hundred yards before he added, "If they don't speak it's because they don't know what to say. Few of them have fought with guns, and they don't know how you feel—whether you want sympathy or admiration. So they say nothing."

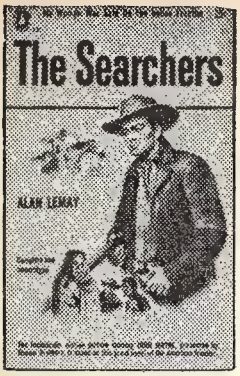
McCord didn't answer. He kept his eyes on the dark shapes of the horses and thought about what the doctor had said. He knew it was partly just talk to cheer him up, but still these were the old doctor's people, and he knew the way they thought and acted pretty well.

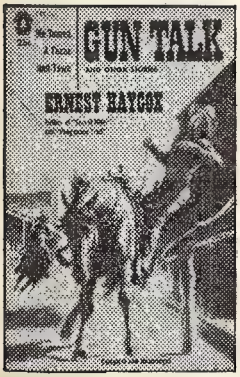
Suddenly he felt better. Maybe it was talk and maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was even that last drink he had taken in the Buckhorn. At any rate, the night seemed suddenly brighter and the sick feeling of disgust and anger was dissolving.

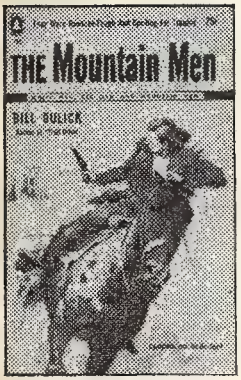
And then Dr. Marsden began to speak again, and this time McCord knew it was not the drink.

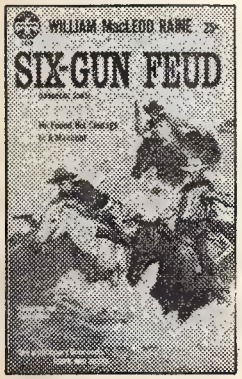
The old doctor said, "I have always thought it was a lucky man who had the ability to help his neighbors. That is why I became a doctor." He slowed the team for an approaching grade as he said, "I take care of their bodies when they are sick, and patch up their holes when they are hurt. But there are times when it is not their bodies but their country that is sick, and then they need a man with other talents—a different sort of doctor."

For the first time the old man looked directly at Jim McCord and smiled. "They need," he said, "a man like you. They need a gun doctor."









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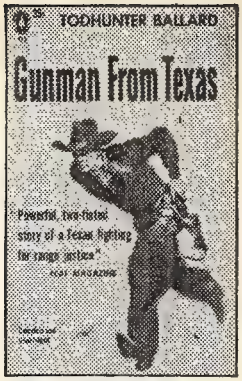

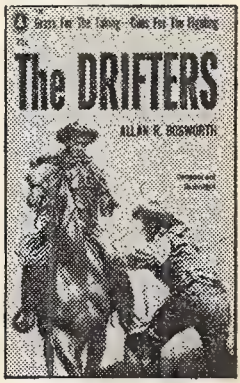

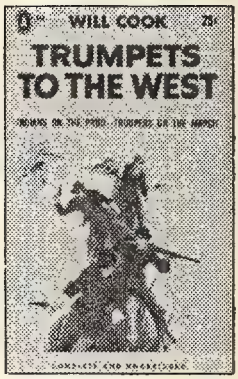

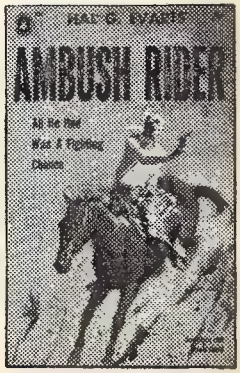

70 P

THE TRAIL TO Peach Meadow

Canyon

A Novel by JIM MAYO

Young Mike Bastian knew the outlaw boss would never let him quit and live to tell of it—not even for the boss' lovely daughter

I

WINTER snows were melting in the forests of the Kaibab, and the red-and-orange hue of the thousand-foot Vermillion Cliffs was streaked with the dampness of melting frost. Deer were feeding in the forest glades among the strands of ponderosa and fir, and trout were leaping in the streams. Where sunlight trailed through the webbed overhang of the leaves, the water danced and sparkled.

Five deer were feeding on the grass along a mountain stream back of Finger Butte, their coats mottled by the light and shadow of the sun shining through the trees.

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A vague something moved in the woods behind them and the five-pronged buck lifted his regal head and stared curiously about. He turned his nose into the wind, reading it cautiously. But his trust was betrayal, for the movement was downwind of him.

The movement came again and a young man stepped from concealment behind a huge fir not twenty feet from the nearest deer. He was straight and tall in fringed gray buckskins, and he wore no hat. His hair was thick, black and wavy, growing full over the temples, and his face was lean and brown. Smiling, he walked toward the deer with quick, lithe strides, and had taken three full steps before some tiny sound betrayed him.

The buck's head came up and swung around, and then with a startled snort it sprang away, the others following.

Mike Bastian stood grinning, his hands on his hips.

"Well, what do you think now, Roundy?" he called. "Could your Apache beat that? I could have touched him if I had jumped after him!"

Rance Roundy came out of the trees—a lean, wiry old man with a gray mustache, and blue eyes that were still bright with an alert awareness.

"No, I'll be darned if any Apache ever lived as could beat that!" he chortled. "Not a mite of it. And I never seen the day I could beat it, either. You're a caution, Mike, you sure are. I'm glad you're not sneaking up after *my* hair!" He drew his pipe from his pocket and started stoking it with tobacco. "We're going back to Toadstool Canyon, Mike. Your dad sent for us."

BASTIAN looked up quickly. "Is there trouble, is that it?"

"No, only he wants to talk with you. Maybe—" Roundy was cautious—"he figures it's time you went out on a job. On one of those rides."

"I think that's it." Mike nodded. "He said in the spring, and it's about time for the first ride. I wonder where they'll go this time?"

"No telling. The deal will be well planned, though. That dad of yours would have made a fine general, Mike. He's got the head for it, he sure has. Never forgets a thing, that one."

"You've been with him a long time, haven't you?"

"Sure—since before he found you. I knowed him in Mexico in the war, and that was longer ago than I like to think. I was a boy then, my ownself." Roundy said suddenly, "Son, look!"

He tossed a huge pine cone into the air, a big one at least nine inches long.

With a flash of movement, Mike Bastian palmed his gun and almost as soon as it hit his hand it belched flame—and again. The second shot spattered the cone into a bunch of flying brown chips.

"Not bad!" Roundy nodded. "You still shoot too quick, though. You got to get over that, Mike. Sometimes one shot is all you'll ever get."

Side by side the two walked through the trees, the earth spongy with a thick blanket of pine needles. Roundy was not as tall as Mike, but he walked with the long, springy stride of the woodsman. He smoked in silence for some distance, and then he spoke up.

"Mike, if Ben's ready for you to go out, what will you do?"

For two steps, Bastian said nothing. Then he spoke slowly. "Why, go, I guess. What else?"

"You're sure? You're sure you want to be an outlaw?"

"That's what I was raised for, isn't it?" There was some bitterness in Mike's voice. "Somebody to take over what Ben Curry started?"

"Yeah, that's what you were raised for, all right. But this you want to remember, Mike: It's your life. Ben Curry, for all his power, can't live it for you. Moreover, times have changed since Ben and me rode into this country. It's not free and wild like it was, because folks are coming in, settling it up, making homes. Getting away won't be so easy, and your pards will change, too. In fact, they have already changed."

For a moment Roundy paused, then continued, "When Ben and me come into this country it was every man for himself. More than one harum-scarum feller who was otherwise all right, got himself the name of outlaw. Nobody figured much about it, then. We

rustled cows, but so did half the big ranchers of the West. And if a cowhand got hard up and stopped a stage, nobody made much fuss unless he killed somebody. They figured it was just high spirits. But the last few years, it's not like that no more. And it's not only that the country is growing up—it's partly Ben Curry himself."

"You mean he's grown too big?" Mike put in.

"What else? Why, your dad controls more land than there is in New York State! Got it right under his thumb! And he's feared over half the West by those who know about him, although not many do.

"Outside of this country around us nobody has seen Ben Curry in years, not leastwise to know him. But they've heard his name, and they know that somewhere there's an outlaw around who rules a gang of almost a thousand men. That he robs and rustles where he will, and nobody has nerve enough to chase him.

"He's been smart, just plenty smart," old Roundy insisted. "Men ride out, and meet at a given point. The whole job is planned in every detail, it's rehearsed, and then they pull it and scatter and meet again here. For a long time folks laid all that to drifting cowpunchers or to gangs passing through. The way Ben's set up, one of the gangs he sends out might pull something anywhere from San Antone to Los Angeles, or from Canada to Mexico, although usually he handles it close around where he lives."

ROUNDY shook his head, but it was a gesture of admiration. "He's been the brains, all right, but don't ever forget it was those guns of his that kept things in line. Lately, he hasn't used his guns. Kerb Perrin and Rigger Molina or some of their boys handle the discipline. He's become too big, Ben Curry has. He's like a king, and the king isn't getting any younger. How do you suppose Perrin will take it when he hears about you taking over? You think he'll like it?"

"I don't imagine he will," Mike replied thoughtfully. "He's probably done some figuring of his own."

"You bet he has! So has Molina, and neither one of them will stop short of murder to get what they want. Your dad still has them buffaloed, I think, but that isn't going to matter when the showdown comes. And I think it's here!"

"You do?" Mike said, surprise in his voice.

"Yeah, I sure do!" Roundy hesitated again. "You know, Mike, I never told you this, but Ben Curry has a family."

"A family?" Despite himself, Mike Bastian was startled.

"Yes, he has a wife and two daughters, and they have no idea he's an outlaw. They live down near Tucson somewhere. Occasionally they come to a ranch he owns in Red Wall Canyon, a ranch supposedly owned by Voyle Ragan. He visits them there."

"Does anybody else know this?"

"Not a soul. And don't you be telling anybody. You see, Ben always wanted a son, and he never had one. When your dad was killed down in Mesilla, Ben took you along with him, and later he told me he was going to raise you to take over whatever he left. That was a long time ago, and since then he's spent a sight of time and money on you."

Looking at the tall lad beside him Roundy said, "You can track like an Apache. In the woods you're a ghost, and I doubt if old Ben Curry himself can throw a gun any faster than you. I'd say you could ride anything that wore hair, and what you don't know about cards, dice and roulette wheels nobody knows. You can handle a knife, fight with your fists, and you can open anything a man ever made in the way of safes and locks. Along with that, you've had a good education, and you could take care of yourself in any company. I don't reckon there ever was a boy had the kind of education you got, and I think Ben's ready to retire."

"You mean, to join his wife and daughters?" Mike questioned.

"That's it. He's getting no younger, and he wants it easy-like for the last years. He was always scared of only one thing, and he had a lot of it as a youngster. That's poverty. Well, he's made his pile and now he wants to step out. Still and all, he knows he can't get out alive unless he leaves somebody behind him that's strong enough and smart enough to keep things under control. That's

where you come in."

"Why don't he let Perrin have it?"

"Mike, you know Perrin. He's dangerous, that one. He's poison-mean and power-crazy. He'd have gone off the deep end a long time ago if it wasn't for Ben Curry. And Rigger Molina is kill-crazy. He would have killed fifty men if it hadn't been that he knew Ben Curry would kill *him* when he got back. No, neither of them could handle this outfit. The whole shebang would go to pieces in ninety days if either one of them had it."

Mike Bastian walked along in silence. There was little that was new in what Roundy was saying, but he was faintly curious as to the old man's purpose. The pair had been much together, and they knew each other as few men ever did. They had gone through storm and hunger and thirst together, living in the desert, mountains and forest, only rarely returning to the rendezvous in Toadstool Canyon.

MIKE knew Roundy had a purpose in his talking now and Bastian waited, listening. Yet even as he walked he was conscious of everything that went on around him. A quail had moved back into the tall grass near the stream, and there was a squirrel up ahead in the crotch of a tree. Not far back a gray wolf had crossed the path only minutes ahead of them.

It was as Roundy had said. Mike was a woodsman, and the thought of taking over the outlaw band filled him with unease. Always he had been aware this time would come, that he had been schooled for it. But before, it had seemed remote and far off. Now, suddenly, it was at hand; it was facing him.

"Mike," Roundy went on, "the country is growing up. Last spring some of our raids raised merry hell, and some of the boys had a bad time getting away. When they start again, there will be trouble and lots of it. Another thing: folks don't look at an outlaw like they used to. He isn't just a wild young cowhand full of liquor, nor a feller who needs a poke, nor somebody building a spread of his own. Now, he'll be like a wolf, with every man hunting him. Before you decide to go into this, you think it over, make up your own mind.

"You know Ben Curry, and I know you like him. Well, you should! Nevertheless, Ben had no right to raise you to be an outlaw. He went his way of his own free will, and if he saw it that way, that was his own doing. But no man has a right to say to another, 'This you must do; this you must be.' No man has a right to train another, starting before he has a chance to make up his mind, and school him in any particular way."

The old man stopped to relight his pipe, and Mike kept silent. He would let Roundy talk out what seemed to bother him.

"I think every man should have the right to decide his own destiny, in so far as he can," Roundy said, continuing his trend of thought. "That goes for you, Mike, and you've got the decision ahead of you. I don't know which you'll do. But if you decide to step out of this gang, then I don't relish being around when it happens, for old Ben will be fit to be tied.

"Right now, you're an honest man. You're clean as a whistle. Once you become an outlaw, a lot of things will change. You'll have to kill, too—don't forget that. It's one thing to kill in defense of your home, your family, or your country. It's another thing when you kill for money or for power."

"You think I'd have to kill Perrin and Molina?" Mike Bastian asked.

"If they didn't get you first!" Roundy spat. "Don't forget this, Mike: You're fast. You're one of the best, and aside from Ben Curry probably the finest shot I ever saw. But that's not shooting at a man who's shooting at you. There's a powerful lot of difference, as you'll see!

"Take Billy the Kid, this Lincoln County gunman we hear about. Frank and George Coe, Dick Brewer, Jesse Evans—any one of them can shoot as good as him. The difference is that the part down inside of him where the nerves should be was left out. When he starts shooting and when he's being shot at, he's like ice! Kerb Perrin's that way, too. Perrin's the cold type, steady as a rock. Rigger Molina's another kind of cat—he explodes all over the place. He's white-hot, but he's deadly as a rattler."

Mike was listening intently as Roundy continued his description:

"Five of them cornered him one time at a stage station out of Julesburg. When the shooting was over, four of them were down and the fifth was holding a gun-shot arm. Molina, he rode off under his own power. He's a shaggy wolf, that one! Wild and uncurried and big as a bear!"

FAR more than Roundy realized did Mike Bastian know the facts about Ben Curry's empire of crime. For three years now, Curry had been leading his foster son through all the intricate maze of his planning. There were spies and agents in nearly every town in the Southwest, and small groups of outlaws quartered here and there on ranches who could be called upon for help at a moment's notice.

Also, there were ranches where fresh horses could be had, and changes of clothing, and where the horses the band had ridden could be lost. At Toadstool Canyon were less than two hundred of the total number of outlaws in the band, and many of those, while living under Curry's protection, were not of his band.

Also, the point Roundy raised had been in Mike's mind, festering there, an abscess of doubt and dismay. The Ben Curry he knew was a huge, kindly man, even if grim and forbidding at times. He had taken the homeless boy and given him kindness and care; had, indeed, trained him as a son. Today, however, was the first inkling Mike had ever had of the existence of that other family. Ben Curry had planned and acted with shrewdness and care.

Mike Bastian had a decision to make, a decision that would change his entire life, whether for better or worse.

Here in the country around the Vermillion Cliffs was the only world he knew. Beyond it? Well, he supposed he could punch cows. He was trained to do many things, and probably there were jobs awaiting such a man as himself.

He could become a gambler, but he had seen and known a good many gamblers and did not relish the idea. Somewhere beyond this wilderness was a larger, newer, wealthier land—a land where honest men lived and reared their families.

II

IN THE massive stone house at the head of Toadstool Canyon, so called because of the gigantic toadstoollike stone near the entrance, Ben Curry leaned his great weight back in his chair and stared broodingly out the door over the valley below.

His big face was as blunt and unlined as rock, but the shock of hair above that leonine face was turning gray. He was growing old. Even spring did not bring the old fire to his veins again, and it had been long since he had ridden out on one of the jobs he planned so shrewdly. It was time he quit.

Yet, for a man who had made decisions sharply and quickly, he was for the first time in his life, uncertain. For six years he had ruled supreme in this remote corner north of the Colorado. For twenty years he had been an outlaw, and for fifteen of those twenty years he had ruled a gang that had grown and extended its ramifications until it was an empire in itself.

Six years ago he had moved to this remote country and created the stronghold where he now lived. Across the southern limit rolled the Colorado River, with its long canyons and maze of rocky wilderness, a bar to any pursuit from the country south of the river where he operated.

Only at Lee's Ferry was there a crossing, and in a cabin nearby his men watched it, night and day. That is, it was the only crossing known to other men. There were two more crossings—one that the gang used in going to and from their raids, and the other known only to Ben himself. It was his ace-in-the-hole, even if not his only one.

One law of the gang, never transgressed, was that there was to be no lawless activity in the Mormon country to the north of them. The Mormons and the Indians were left strictly alone, and were their friends. So were the few ranchers who lived in the area. These few traded at the stores run by the gang, and bought their supplies close to home and at cheaper prices than they could have managed elsewhere.

Ben Curry had never quite made up his mind about Kerb Perrin. He knew that Perrin was growing restive, that the outlaw was

aware that Curry was aging, and Perrin was eager for the power of leadership himself. Yet the one factor about which Curry couldn't be certain was whether Perrin would stand for the taking over of the band by Mike Bastian.

Well, Mike had been well trained; it would be his problem. Ben smiled grimly. He was the old bull of the herd, and Perrin was pawing the dirt, but what would he say when a young bull stepped in? One who had not won his spurs with the gang?

That was why Curry had sent for Mike, for it was time Mike be groomed for leadership, time he moved out on his first job. And he had just the one. It was big, it was sudden, and it was dramatic. It would have an excellent effect on the gang if it was brought off smoothly, and Ben was going to let Mike plan the whole job.

There was a sharp knock outside, and Curry smiled a little, recognizing it.

"Come in!" he bellowed.

He watched Perrin stride into the room with his quick, nervous steps, his eyes scanning the room.

"Chief," Perrin said, "the boys are getting restless. It's spring, you know, and most of them are broke. Have you got anything in mind?"

"Sure, several things. But one that's good and tough! Struck me it might be a good one to break the kid in on."

"Oh?" Perrin's eyes veiled. "You mean he'll go along?"

"No, I'm going to let him run it. The whole show. It will be good for him."

Kerb Perrin absorbed that. For the first time, he felt worry. For the first time, an element of doubt entered his mind. He had wondered before about Bastian and what his part would be in all this.

FOR years, Perrin had looked forward to the time when he could take over. He knew there would be trouble with Rigger Molina, but he had thought that phase of it out. He knew he could handle it. But what if Curry was planning to jump young Bastian into leadership?

Quick, hot passion surged through Perrin, and when he looked up, it was all he could do to keep his voice calm.

"You think that's wise?" he questioned. "How will the boys feel about going out with a green kid?"

"He knows what to do," Curry said. "They'll find he's smart as any of them, and he knows plenty. This is a big job, and a tough one."

"Who goes with him?"

"Maybe I'll let him pick them," Curry said thoughtfully. "Good practice for him."

"What's the job?" Perrin asked, voice sullen.

"The gold train!"

Perrin's fingers tightened, digging into his palms. This was the job *he* wanted! The shipment from the mines! It would be enormous, rich beyond anything they had done!

Months before, in talking of his job, he had laid out his plan for it before Curry. But it had been vetoed. He had recommended the killing of every manjack of them, and burial of them all, so the train would vanish completely.

"You sound like Molina," Curry had said, chuckling. "Too bloody!"

"Dead men don't talk!" Perrin had replied grimly. Now Perrin said slowly, "That will be tough for the kid. Mighty tough!"

Yet even as he spoke he was thinking of something else. He was thinking of the effect of this upon the men of the outfit. Many of them liked Mike Bastian, and more than one of them had helped train him. In a way, many of the older men were as proud of Mike as if he had been their own son. If he stepped out now and brought off this job, he would acquire power and prestige in the gang equal to Perrin's own.

Fury enguled Perrin. Curry had no right to do this to him! Sidetracking him for an untried kid! Shoving Bastian down all their throats!

Suddenly, rage died, and in its place came resolution. It was time he acted on his own. He would swing his own job, the one he had had in mind for so long, and that would counteract the effect of the gold-train steal. Moreover, he would be throwing the challenge into Ben Curry's teeth, for he would plan this job without consulting him. If there was going to be a struggle for leadership, it

could begin here and now.

"He'll handle the job all right," Curry said confidently. "He has been trained, and he has the mind for it. He plans well. I hadn't spoken of it before, but I've asked his advice on a few things without letting him know why, and he has always come through with the right answers."

Kerb Perrin left the stone house filled with burning resentment, but also something of triumph. At last, after years of taking orders, he was going on his own. Yet the still, small voice of fear was in him, too. What would Ben Curry do?

The thought made him quail. He had seen the cold fury of Curry when it was aroused, and he had seen him use a gun. He himself was fast, but was he as fast as Ben Curry? In his heart, he doubted it. He dismissed the thought, although storing it in his mind. Something would have to be done about Ben Curry. . . .

MIKE BASTIAN stood before Ben Curry's table and the two men stared at each other.

Ben Curry, the old outlaw chief, huge, bearlike and mighty, his eyes fierce yet glowing with a kindly light now, and something of pride, too. Facing him, tall and lithe, his shoulders broad and mighty, was Mike Bastian, child of the Frontier grown to manhood and trained in every art of the wilds, every dishonest practice in the books, every skill with weapons. Yet educated, too, a man who could conduct himself well in any company.

"You take four men and look over the ground yourself, Mike," Ben Curry was saying. "I want you to plan this one. The gold train leaves the mines on the twentieth. There will be five wagons, the gold distributed among them, although there won't be a lot of it as far as quantity is concerned. That gold train will be worth roughly five hundred thousand dollars.

"When that job is done," he continued, "I'm going to step down and leave you in command. You knew I was planning that. I'm old, and I want to live quietly for awhile, and this outfit takes a strong hand to run it. Think you can handle it?"

"I think so," Mike Bastian said softly.

"I think so, too. Watch Perrin—he's the snaky one. Rigger is dangerous, but whatever he does will be out in the open. Not so Perrin. He's a conniver. He never got far with me because I was always one jump ahead of him. And I still am!"

The old man was silent for a few minutes, as he stared out of the window.

"Mike," he said then, doubt entering his voice, "maybe I've done wrong. I meant to raise you the way I have. I'm not so sure what is right and what wrong, and never have been. Never gave it much thought, though.

"When I came West it was dog eat dog and your teeth had to be big. I got knocked down and kicked around some, then I started taking big bites myself. I organized, and I got bigger. In all these years nobody has ever touched me. If *you've* got a strong hand, you can do the same. Sometimes you'll have to buy men, sometimes you'll have to frighten them, and sometimes you'll have to kill."

He shook his head as if clearing it of memories past, then glanced up.

"Who will you take with you?" he asked. "I mean, in scouting this layout."

Ben Curry waited, for it was judgment of men that Bastian would need most. It pleased him that Mike did not hesitate.

"Roundy, Doc Sawyer, Colley and Garlin."

Curry glanced at him, his eyes hard and curious. "Why?"

"Roundy has an eye for terrain like no man in this world," Mike said. "He says mine's as good, but I'll take him along to verify or correct my judgment. Doc Sawyer is completely honest. If he thinks I'm wrong, he'll say so. As for Colley and Garlin, they are two of the best men in the whole outfit. They will be pleased if I ask their help, which puts them on my side in a measure, and they can see how I work.

Curry nodded. "Smart—and you're right. Colley and Garlin are two of the best men, and absolutely fearless." He smiled a little. "If you have trouble with Perrin or Molina, it won't hurt to have them on your side. . . ."

Despite himself, Mike Bastian was excited. He was twenty-two years old and by

Frontier standards had been a man for several years. But in all that time, aside from a few trips into the Mormon country and one to Salt Lake, he had never been out of the maze of canyons and mountains north of the Colorado.

Roundy led the way, for the trail was an old one to him. They were taking the secret route south used by the gang on their raids, and as they rode toward it, Mike stared at the country. He was always astonished by its ruggedness.

SNOW still lay in some of the darker places of the forest, but as they neared the canyon the high cliffs towered even higher and the trail dipped down through a narrow gorge of rock. Centuries of erosion had carved the rock into grotesque figures resembling those of men and animals, colored with shades of brown, pink, gray and red, and tapering off into a pale yellow. There were shadowed pools among the rocks, some from snow water and others from natural springs, and there were scattered clumps of oak and piñon.

In the bottom of the gorge the sun did not penetrate except at high noon, and there the trail wound along between great jumbled heaps of boulders, cracked and broken from their fall off the higher cliffs.

Mike Bastian followed Roundy, who rode hump-shouldered on a ragged gray horse that seemed as old as he himself, but as sure-footed and mountainwise. Mike was wearing a black hat now, but his same buckskins. He had substituted boots for the moccasins he usually wore, although the moccasins reposed in his saddle-bags, ready at hand.

Behind them rode Doc Sawyer, his lean, saturnine face quiet, his eyes faintly curious and interested as he scanned the massive walls of the canyon. Tubby Colley was short and thick-chested, and confident—a hard-jawed man who had been a first-rate ranch foreman before he'd shot two men and hit the outlaw trail.

Tex Garlin was tall, rangy and quiet. He was a Texan, and little was known of his background, although it was said he could carve a dozen notches on his guns if he wished.

Suddenly Roundy turned the gray horse and rode abruptly at the face of the cliff, but when close up, the sand and boulders broke and a path showed along the underscoured rock. Following this for several hundred yards they found a canyon that cut back into the cliff itself, then turned to head toward the river.

The roar of the Colorado, high with spring freshets, was loud in their ears before they reached it. Finally they came out on a sandy bank littered with driftwood.

Nearby was a small cabin and a plot of garden. The door of the house opened and a tall old man came out.

"Howdy!" he greeted. "I been expecting somebody." His shrewd old eyes glanced from face to face, then hesitated at sight of Mike. "Haven't seen you before," he said pointedly.

"It's all right, Bill," Roundy said. "This is Mike Bastian."

"Ben Curry's boy?" Bill stared. "I heard a sight of you, son. I sure have! Can you shoot like they say?"

Mike flushed. "I don't know what they say," he said, grinning. "But I'll bet a lot of money I can hit the side of that mountain if it holds still."

Garlin stared at him thoughtfully, and Colley smiled a little.

"Don't take no funning from him," Roundy said. "That boy can shoot!"

"Let's see some shooting, son," Bill suggested. "I always did like to see a man who could shoot."

Bastian shook his head. "There's no reason for shooting," he protested. "A man's a fool to shoot unless he's got cause. Ben Curry always told me never to draw a gun unless I meant to use it."

"Go ahead," Colley said, "show him."

Old Bill pointed. "See that black stick end jutting up over there? It's about fifty, maybe sixty paces. Can you hit it?"

"You mean that one?" Mike palmed his gun and fired, and the black stick pulverized.

It was a movement so smooth and practiced that no one of the men even guessed he had intended to shoot, and Garlin's jaws stopped their calm chewing and he stared with his mouth open for as long as it took

to draw a breath. Then he glanced at Colley.

"Wonder what Kerb would say to that?" he said, astonished. "This kid can shoot!"

"Yeah," Colley agreed, "but the stick didn't have a gun!"

Old Bill worked the ferry out of a cave under the cliff and freighted them across the swollen river in one hair-raising trip. With the river behind them, they wound up through the rocks and started south.

III

THE mining and cowtown of Weaver was backed up near a large hill on the banks of a small creek. Colley and Garlin rode into the place at sundown, and an hour later Doc Sawyer and Roundy rode in.

Garlin and Colley were leaning on the bar having a drink, and they ignored the later arrivals. Mike Bastian followed not long afterward, and walked to the bar alone.

Most of those in the saloon were Mexicans. But three tough-looking white men lounging against the bar nearby glanced at Mike in his buckskins, and one of them whispered something to the others, at which they all laughed.

Doc Sawyer was sitting in a poker game, and his eyes lifted. Mike leaned nonchalantly against the bar, avoiding the stares of the three toughs near him. One of them moved over closer.

"Hi, stranger!" he said. "That's a right purty suit you got. Where could I get one like it?"

Garlin looked up and his face stiffened. He nudged Colley. "Look!" Garlin said quickly, "Corbus and Fletcher! And trouble hunting! We'd better get into this!"

Colley shook his head. "No. Let's see what the kid does."

Mike looked around, his expression mild. "You want a suit like this?" he inquired of the stranger. His eyes were innocent, but he could see the sort of man he had to deal with. These three were toughs, and dangerous. "Most any Navajo could make one for you."

"Just like that?" Corbus sneered.

He was drinking and in a naggling, quarrelsome mood. Mike looked altogether too neat for his taste.

"Sure!" Mike agreed. "Just like this. But I don't know what you'd want with it. This suit would be pretty big for you to fill."

"Huh?" Corbus' face flamed. Then his mouth tightened. "You getting smart with me, kid?"

"No." Mike Bastian turned and his voice cracked like a whip in the suddenly silent room. "Neither am I being hurrahed by any lame-brained, liquor-guzzling saddle tramp! You made a remark about my suit, and I answered it. Now, you can have a drink on me, all three of you, and I'm suggesting you drink up." His voice suddenly became soft. "I want you to drink up because I want to be very, very sure we're friends, see?"

Corbus stared at Bastian, a cold hint of danger filtering through the normal stubbornness of his brain. Something told him this was perilous going, yet he was stubborn, too stubborn. He smiled slowly. "Kid," he drawled, "supposing I don't want to drink with no tenderfoot brat?"

Corbus never saw what happened. His brain warned him as Mike's left hand moved, but he never saw the right. The left stabbed his lips and the right cracked on the angle of his jaw, and he lifted from his feet and hit the floor on his shoulder-blades, out cold.

Fletcher and the third tough stared from Corbus to Mike. Bastian was not smiling. "You boys want to drink?" he asked. "Or do we go on from here?"

Fletcher stared at him. "What if a man drawed a gun instead of using his fists?" he demanded.

"I'd kill him," Bastian replied quietly.

Fletcher blinked. "I reckon you would," he agreed. He turned, said, "Let's have a drink. That boot hill out there's already got twenty graves in it."

Garlin glanced at Colley, his eyebrows lifted. Colley shrugged.

"I wonder what Corbus will do when he gets up?" he said.

Garlin chuckled. "Nothing today. He won't be feeling like it!"

Colley nodded. "Reckon you're right, and I reckon the old man raised him a wildcat!

I can hardly wait to see Kerb Perrin's face when we tell him."

"You reckon," Garlin asked, "that what we heard is true? That Ben Curry figures to put this youngster into his place when he steps out?"

"Yep, that's the talk," Colley answered.

"Well, maybe he's got it. We'll sure know before this trip is over."

NOISE of the stage-coach rolling down the street drifted into the saloon, and Mike Bastian strolled outside and headed toward the stage station. The passengers were getting down to stretch their legs and to eat. Three of them were women.

One of them noticed Mike standing there and walked toward him. She was a pale, pretty girl with large gray eyes.

"How much farther to Red Wall Canyon?" she inquired.

Mike Bastian stiffened. "Why, not far. That is, you'll make it by morning if you stick with the stage. There is a cross country way if you had you a buckboard, though."

"Could you tell us where we could hire one? My mother is not feeling well."

He stepped down off the boardwalk and headed toward the livery stable with her. As they drew alongside the stage, Mike looked up. An older woman and a girl were standing near the stage, but he was scarcely aware of anything but the girl. Her hair was blondish, but darker than that of the girl who walked beside him, and her eyes, too, were gray. There the resemblance ended, for where this girl beside him was quiet and sweet, the other was vivid.

She looked at him and their eyes met. He swept off his hat. The girl beside him spoke. "This is my mother, Mrs. Ragan, and my sister Drusilla." She looked up at him quickly. "My name is Juliana."

Mike bowed. He had eyes only for Drusilla, who was staring at him.

"I am Mike Bastian," he said.

"He said he could hire us a rig to drive across country to Red Wall Canyon," Juliana explained. "It will be quicker that way."

"Yes," Mike agreed, "much quicker. I'll see what I can do. Just where in Red Wall did you wish to go?"

"To Voyle Ragan's ranch," Drusilla said. "The V Bar."

He had turned away, but he stopped in midstride.

"Did you say—Voyle Ragan's?"

"Yes. Is there anything wrong?" Drusilla stared at him. "What's the mater?"

He regained his composure swiftly. "Nothinf. Only, I'd heard the name and—" he smiled—"I sort of wanted to know for sure, if I came calling."

Juliana laughed. "Why, of course! We'd be glad to see you."

He walked swiftly away. These, then, were Ben Curry's daughters. That older woman would be his wife! He was their foster brother, yet obviously his name had meant nothing to them. Neither, he reflected, would their names have meant anything to him nor the destination, had it not been for what Roundy had told him only the previous day.

Drusilla, her name was. His heart pounded at the memory of her, and he glanced back through the gathering dusk at the three women standing there by the stage station.

Hiring the rig was a matter of minutes. He liked the look of the driver, a lean man, tall and white-haired.

"No danger on that road this time of year," the driver assured him. "I can have them there in no time by taking the canyon road."

Drusilla was waiting for him when Mike walked back.

"Did you find one?" she asked, then listened to his explanation and thanked him.

"Would it be all right with you," Mike said, "if I call at the V Bar?"

She looked at him, her face grave, but a dancing light in her eyes. "Why, my sister invited you, did she not?"

"Yes, but I'd like you to invite me, too."

"I?" She studied him for a minute. "Of course, we'd be glad to see you. My mother likes visitors as well as Julie and I do, so won't you ask her, too?"

"I'll take the invitation from you and your sister as being enough." He grinned. "If I ask your mother, I might have to ask your father!"

"Father isn't with us!" She laughed.

"We'll see him at Ragan's. He's a rancher somewhere way up north in the wilds. His name is Ben Ragan. Have you ever heard of him?"

"Seems to me I have," he admitted, "but I wouldn't say for sure."

AFTER they had gone Mike wandered around and stopped in the saloon, after another short talk with a man at the livery stable. Listening and asking an occasional question, he gathered the information he wanted on the gold shipment. Even as he asked the questions, it seemed somehow fantastic that he, of all people, should be planning such a thing.

Never before had he thought of it seriously, but now he did. And it was not only because the thought went against his own grain, but because he was thinking of Drusilla Ragan.

What a girl she was! He sobered suddenly. Yet, for all of that, she was the daughter of an outlaw. Did she know it? From her question, he doubted it.

Doc Sawyer cashed in his chips and left the poker game to join Mike at the bar.

"The twentieth, all right," he said softly. "And five of them are going to carry shots. There will be twelve guards in all, which looks mighty tough. The big fellow at the poker table is one of the guards, and all of them are picked men."

Staring at his drink, Mike puzzled over his problem. What Roundy had said was of course, true. This was a turning point for him. He was still an honest man, yet when he stepped over the boundary it would make a difference to a girl like Dru Ragan, for instance.

The fact that her father also was an outlaw would make little difference. Listening to Sawyer made him wonder. Why had such a man, brilliant, intelligent, and well educated, ever become a criminal?

Sawyer was a gambler and a skillful one, yet he was a doctor, too, and a fine surgeon. His education was as good as study and money could make it, and it had been under his guidance that Mike Bastian had studied.

"Doc," he said suddenly, "whatever made you ride a crooked trail?"

Sawyer glanced at him suddenly, a new expression in his eyes. "What do you mean, Mike? Do you have doubts?"

"Doubts? That seems to be all I do have these last few days."

"I've wondered about that," Doc said. "You have been so quiet that I never doubted but what you were perfectly willing to go on with Ben Curry's plans for you. It means money and power for you. It means money and power, Mike—all a man could want. If it is doubt about the future for outlaws that disturbs you, don't let it. From now on it will be political connections and bribes, but with the money you'll have to work with, that should be easy."

"It should be," Mike said slowly. "Only maybe—just maybe—I don't want to."

"Conscience rears its ugly head!" Sawyer smiled ironically. "Can it be that Ben Curry's instructions have fallen on fallow ground? What started this sudden feeling? The approach of a problem? Fear?" Doc had turned toward Mike and was staring at him with aroused interest. "Or," he added, "is there a woman? A girl?"

"Would that be so strange?"

"Strange? But no! I've wondered it hasn't happened before, but then you've lived like a recluse these past years. Who is she?"

"It doesn't matter," Mike answered. "I was thinking of this before I saw her. Wondering what I should do."

"Don't ask me," Sawyer said. "I made a mess of my own life. Partly a woman and partly the desire for what I thought was easy money. Well, there's no such a thing as easy money, but I found that out too late. You make your own decision. What was it Matthew Arnold said? I think you learned the quotation."

" 'No man can save his brother's soul, or pay his brother's debt.' "

"Right! So you save your own and pay your own. There's one thing to remember, Mike. No matter which way you go, there will be killing. If you take over Ben Curry's job, you'll have to kill Perrin and Molina, if you can. And you may have to kill them, and even Ben Curry, if you should decide to step out."

MIKE said quickly, "Not Dad."

"Don't be sure. It isn't only what he thinks that matters, Mike. No man is a complete ruler or dictator. His name is only the symbol. He is the mouthpiece for the wishes of his followers, and as long as he expresses those wishes, he leads them. When he fails, he falls. Ben Curry is the boss not only because he has power in him, but also because he has organization, because he has made them money, because he has offered them safety. If you left, there would be a chink in the armor. No outlaw ever trusts another outlaw who turns honest, for he always fears betrayal."

Bastian tossed off his drink. "Let's check with Roundy. He's been on the prowl."

Roundy came to them hastily. "We've got to get out of town, quick!" he said. "Ducrow and Fernandez just blew in and they are drunk and raising the devil. Both of them are talking, too, and if they see us they will spill everything!"

"All right." Mike straightened. "Get our horses. Get theirs, too. We'll take them with us."

Garlin and Colley had come to the bar. Garlin shook his head. "Ducrow's poison mean when he's drunk, and Fernandez sides him in everything," Garlin informed. "When Ducrow gets drunk he always pops off too much! The Boss forbade him weeks ago to come down here."

"He's a pal of Perrin's," Colley said, "so he thinks he can get away with it."

"Here they come now!" Roundy exclaimed.

"All right—drift!" Bastian ordered. "Make it quick with the horses."

IV

SALOON doors slammed open and the two men came in. One look, and Mike could see there was cause for worry. Tom Ducrow was drunk and ugly, and behind him was Snake Fernandez. They were an unpleasant pair, and had made their share of trouble in Ben Curry's organization, though always protected by Perrin.

Bastian started forward, but he had scarcely taken a step when Ducrow saw him.

"There he is!" he bellowed loudly. "The pet! The boss' pet!" He stared around at the customers in the barroom. "You know who this man is? He is—"

"Ducrow!" Mike snapped. "Shut up and go home. Now!"

"Look who's giving orders!" Ducrow sneered. "Getting big for your britches, ain't you?"

"Your horses will be outside in a minute," Mike said. "Get on them and start back, fast!"

"Suppose," Ducrow sneered, "you make me!"

Mike had been moving toward him, and now with a pantherlike leap he was beside the outlaw. With a quick slash from his pistol barrel he floored him.

With an oath, Snake Fernandez reached for a gun, and Mike had no choice. He shot him in the shoulder. Ferandez staggered, the gun dropping from his fingers. Mouthing curses, he reached for his left-hand gun.

But even as he reached, Garlin—who had stayed behind when the others went for the horses—stepped up behind him. Jerking the gun from the man's holster, he spun him about and shoved him through the door.

Mike pulled the groggy Ducrow to his feet and pushed him outside after Fernandez.

A big man got up hastily from the back of the room. Mike took one quick glimpse at the star on his chest.

"What goes on here?" the sheriff demanded.

"Nothing at all," Mike said affably. "Just a couple of the boys from our ranch feeling their oats a little. We'll take them out and off your hands."

The sheriff stared from Mike to Doc Sawyer and Colley, who had just come through the door.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "I don't believe I know you hombres."

"That's right, sir, you don't," Mike said. "We're from the Mogollons, riding back after driving some cattle through to California. It was a rough trip, and this liquor here got to a couple of the boys."

The sheriff hesitated, looking sharply from one to the other.

"*You* may be a cowhand," he said, "but

that hombre"—he pointed to Sawyer—"looks like a gambler!"

Mike chuckled. "That's a joke on you, boy!" he said to Doc. Then he turned back to the sheriff. "He's a doctor, sir, and quite a good one. A friend of my boss'."

A gray-haired man got up and strolled alongside the sheriff. His eyes were alive with suspicion.

"From the Mogollons?" he queried. "That's where I'm from. Who did you say your boss was?"

Doc Sawyer felt his scalp tighten, but Mike smiled.

"Jack McCardle," he said, "of the Flying M. We aren't his regular hands—just a bunch passing through. Doc here, being an old friend of Jack's, handled the sale of the beef."

The sheriff looked around.

"That right, Joe?" he asked the gray-haired man. "There a Flying M over there?"

"Yes, there is." Joe was obviously puzzled. "Good man, too, but I had no idea he was shipping beef!"

The sheriff studied Bastian thoughtfully. "Guess you're all right," he said finally. "But you sure don't *talk* like a cowhand."

"As a matter of fact," Mike said, swallowing hard, "I was studying for the ministry, but my interests began to lead me in more profane directions, so I am afraid I backslid. It seems—" he spoke gravely—"that a leaning toward poker isn't conducive to the correct manner in the pulpit!"

"I should say not!" the sheriff chuckled. "All right, son, take your pardners with you, let 'em sleep it off."

MIKE turned away, and his men followed him. Ducrow and Fernandez had disappeared. They rode swiftly out of town and took the trail for Toadstool Canyon. It wasn't until they were several miles on the road that Sawyer glanced at Mike and expressed an opinion.

"You'll do," he said. "I was never so sure of a fight in my life!"

"That's right, Boss!" Garlin said. "I was betting we'd have to shoot our way out of town! You sure smooth-talked 'em. Never heard it done prettier!"

"Sure did," Colley agreed. "I don't envy you having Ducrow and Fernandez for enemies, though."

Kerb Perrin and Rigger Molina were both in conference with Ben Curry when Mike Bastian came up the stone steps and through the door. Both looked up sharply.

"Perrin," Bastian said, "what were Ducrow and Fernandez doing in Weaver?"

"In Weaver?" Perrin straightened up slowly, nettled by Mike's tone, but puzzled, too.

"Yes, in Weaver! We nearly had to shoot our way out of town because of them. They were down there, drunk and talking too much. When I told them to get on their horses and go home, they made trouble."

Kerb Perrin was on dangerous ground. He well knew how harsh Ben Curry was about talkative outlaws, and while he had no idea what the two had been doing in Weaver, he knew they were trouble-makers. Perrin also knew they were supporters of his. Ben Curry knew that, too, and so did Rigger Molina.

"They made trouble?" Perrin questioned now. "How?"

"Ducrow started to tell who I was."

"What happened?"

Mike was aware that Ben Curry had tipped back in his chair and was watching him with interest.

"I knocked him down with a pistol barrel," he said.

"You *what?*" Perrin stared. Ducrow was a bad man to tangle with. "What about Fernandez?"

"He tried to draw on me, and I put a bullet in his shoulder."

"You should've killed him," Molina said. "You'll have to, sooner or later."

Kerb Perrin was stumped. He had not expected this, or believed that Mike Bastian was capable of handling such a situation. He was suddenly aware that Doc Sawyer had come into the room.

Bastian faced Ben Curry. "We got what we went after," he said, "but another bad break like Ducrow and Fernandez, and we'd walk into a trap!"

"There won't be another!" Curry said harshly.

When Mike had gone out, Doc Sawyer looked at Ben Curry and smiled.

"You should have seen him and heard him," he said as Molina and Perrin were leaving. "It would have done your heart good! He had a run-in with Corbus and Fletcher, too. Knocked Corbus out with a punch and backed Fletcher down. Oh, he'll do, that boy of yours, he'll do! The way he talked that sheriff out of it was one of the smoothest things I've seen or heard in my life!"

Ben Curry nodded with satisfaction. "I knew it! I knew he had it!"

Doc Sawyer smiled, and looked up at the chief from under his sunburned eyebrows. "He met a girl, too."

"A girl? Good for him! It's about time!"

"This was a very particular girl, Chief," Sawyer continued. "I thought you'd like to know. If I'm any judge of men, he fell for her and fell hard. And I'm not so sure it didn't happen both ways. He told me something about it, but I had already seen for myself."

SOMETHING in Sawyer's tone made Curry sit up a little.

"Who was the girl?" he demanded.

"A girl who came in on the stage." Doc spoke carefully, avoiding Curry's eyes now. "Mike got the girl and her family a rig to drive them out to a ranch. Out to the V Bar."

Ben Curry's face went white. So Doc knew! It was in every line of him, every tone of his voice. The one thing he had tried to keep secret, the thing known only to himself and Roundy, was known to Doc! And to how many others?

"The girl's name," Doc continued, "was Drusilla Ragan. She's a beautiful girl."

"Well, I won't have it!" Curry said in a strained voice.

Doc Sawyer looked up, faintly curious. "You mean the foster son you raised isn't good enough for your daughter?"

"Don't say that word here!" Curry snapped, his face hard. "Who knows besides you?"

"Nobody of whom I am aware," Doc said with a shrug. "I know only by accident. You will remember the time you were laid up with that bullet wound. You were delirious, and that's why I took care of you myself—because you talked too much." Doc lighted his pipe. "They made a nice-looking pair," he said. "And I think she invited him to Red Wall Canyon."

"He won't go! I won't have any of this crowd going there!"

"Chief, that boy's what you made him, but he's not an outlaw yet," Doc said, puffing contentedly on his pipe. "He could be, and he might be, but if he does, the crime will lie on your shoulders."

Curry shook himself and stared out the window.

"Chief, the boy has it in him," Sawyer went on. "You should have seen him throw that gun on Fernandez. The kid's fast as lightning! He thinks, too. If he takes over this gang, he'll run this country like you never ran it. I say, *if*."

"He'll do it," Curry said confidently. "You know he will. He always does what I tell him."

Doc chuckled. "He may, and again he may not. Mike Bastian has a mind of his own, and he's doing some thinking. He may decide he doesn't want to take over. What will you do then?"

"Nobody has ever quit this gang. Nobody ever will!"

"You'd order him killed?"

Ben Curry hesitated. This was something he had never dreamed of. Something—

"He'll do what he's told!" he repeated, but he was no longer sure.

A tiny voice of doubt was arising within him, a voice that made him remember the Mike Bastian who was a quiet, determined little boy who would not cry, a boy who listened and obeyed. Yet now Curry knew, and admitted it for the first time, that Mike Bastian had always had a mind of his own.

Never before had the thought occurred to him that Mike might disobey, that he might refuse. And if he did, what then? It was a rule of the outlaw pack that no man could leave it and live. A few had tried, and their bodies now lay in boot hill. But Mike, his son? No, not Mike!

Within him there was a deeper knowledge,

an awareness that here his interests and those of the pack would divide. Even if he said no, they would say yes.

"Who would kill him, Chief? Kerb Perrin? Rigger Molina? You?" Doc Sawyer shook his head slowly. "You *might* be able to do it, maybe one of the others, but I doubt it. You've created the man who may destroy you, Chief, unless you join him."

LONG after Doc Sawyer was gone, Ben Curry sat there staring out over the shadowed valley. He was getting old. For the first time he was beginning to doubt his rightness, beginning to wonder if he had not wronged Mike Bastian.

But what of Mike and Dru, his beloved, gray-eyed daughter. The girl with dash and spirit? But why not? Slowly, he thought over Mike Bastian's life. Where was the boy wrong? Where was he unfitted for Dru? By the teachings given him on his, Curry's, own suggestion? His own order? Or was there yet time?

Ben Curry heaved himself to his feet and began to pace the carpeted floor. He would have to decide. He would have to make up his mind, for a man's life and future lay in his hands, to make or break.

What if Dru wanted him anyway, outlaw or not? Ben Curry stopped and stared into the fireplace. If it had been Julie now, he might forbid it. But Dru? He chuckled. She would laugh at him. Dru had too much of his own nature, and she had a mind of her own. . . .

Mike Bastian was restless the day after the excitement in Weaver. He rolled out of his bunk and walked out on the terrace. Only he and Doc Sawyer slept in the stone house where Ben Curry lived. Roundy was down in town with the rest of them, but tonight Mike wanted to walk, to think.

There had been a thrill of excitement in out-talking the sheriff, in facing down Fletcher, the man from the Mogollens, in flattening Corbus. And there had been more of it in facing Ducrow and Fernandez. Yet, was that what he wanted? Or did he want something more worthwhile? The something he might find with Drusilla Ragan?

Already he had won a place with the gang. He knew the story would be all over the outlaw camp by now.

Walking slowly down the street of the settlement, he turned at right angles and drifted down a side road. He wanted to get away from the familiar for a little while, to think things out. He had turned again and started back into the pines when he heard a voice coming from a nearby house. The words halted him. Mike heard the ending:

"—at Red Wall."

Swiftly he glided to the house and flattened against the side. Kerb Perrin was speaking:

"It's a cinch, and we'll do it on our own without anybody's say-so. There's about two thousand cattle in the herd, and I've got a buyer for them. We can hit the place just about sunup. Right now, they have only four hands on the place, but about the first of next month they will start hiring. It's now or not at all."

"How many men will we take?" That was Ducrow's voice.

"A dozen. That will keep the divvy large enough, and that many can swing it. Hell, that Ragan ranch is easy! The boss won't hear about it until too late, and the chances are he will never guess it was us."

"I wouldn't want him to," Fernandez said.

"To hell with him!" Ducrow was irritated. "I'd like a crack at that Bastian again."

"Stick with me," Perrin said, "and I'll set him up for you. Curry is about to turn things over to him. Well, we'll beat him to it."

"You said there were girls?" Ducrow suggested.

"There are two white girls visiting, and a couple of Mexican girls who work there. One older woman. I want one of those girls myself—the youngest of the Ragan sisters. What happens to the others is none of my business."

Mike Bastian's hand dropped to his gun and his lips tightened. The tone of Perrin's voice filled him with fury, and Ducrow was as bad.

"What happens if Curry does find out?" Ducrow demanded.

"What would happen?" Perrin said fierce-

ly. "I'll kill him like I've wanted to all these years! I've hated that man like I never hated anybody in my life!"

"What about that Bastian?" Ducrow demanded.

PERRIN laughed. "That's your problem! If you and Fernandez can't figure out how to handle him, then I don't know you."

"He knocked out Corbus, too," Ducrow said. "We might get him to throw in with us, if this crowd is all afraid of old Ben Curry."

"I'm not so sure about him my ownself," said another voice, which Mike placed as belonging to an outlaw named Bayless. "He may not be so young any more, but he's hell on wheels with a gun!"

"Forget him!" Perrin snapped, and went on, "You three, and Clatt, Panelli, Monson, Kiefer and a few others will go with us. All good men. There's a lot of dissatisfaction, anyway. Molina wants to raid the Mormons. They've a lot of rich stock and there's no reason why we can't sell it south of the river, and the other stock north of it. We can get rich!"

V

MIKE BASTIAN waited no longer, but eased away from the wall. He was tempted to wait for Perrin and brace him when he came out. His first thought was to go to Ben Curry, but he might betray his interest in Drusilla and the time was not yet ripe for that. What would her father say if he found the foster son he had raised to be an outlaw was in love with his daughter?

It was foolish to think of it, yet he couldn't help it. There was time between now and the twentieth for him to get back to Red Wall and see her.

A new thought occurred to him. Ben Curry would know the girls and their mother were here and would be going to see them! That would be his chance to learn of Ben's secret pass to the river bank, and how he crossed the Colorado.

Recalling other trips, Bastian knew the route must be a much quicker one than any he knew of, and was probably farther west and south, toward the canyon country. Already he was eager to see the girl again, and all he could think of was her trim figure, the laughter in her eyes, the soft curve of her lips.

There were other things to be considered. If there was as much unrest in the gang as Perrin said, things, might be nearing a definite break. Certainly outlaws were not men to stand hitched for long, and Ben Curry had commanded them for longer than anyone would believe. Their loyalty was due partly to the returns from their ventures under his guidance, and partly to fear of his far-reaching power. But he was growing old, and there were those among them who feared he was losing his grip.

Mike felt a sudden urge to saddle his horse and be gone, to get away from all this potential cruelty, the conniving and hatred that lay dormant here, or was seething and ready to explode. He could ride out now by the Kaibab trail through the forest, skirt the mountains and find his own way through the canyon. It was a question whether he could escape, whether Ben Curry would let him go.

To run now meant to abandon all hope of seeing Dru again, and Mike knew he could not do that.

Returning to his quarters in the big stone house, he stopped in front of a mirror. With deadly, flashing speed, he began to practice quick draws of his guns. Each night he did this twenty times as swiftly as his darting hands could move.

Finally he sat down on his bed, thinking. Roundy first, and today Doc Sawyer. Each seemed to be hoping he would throw up the sponge and escape this outlaw life before it was too late. Doc said it was his life, but was it?

There was a light tap on the door. Gun in hand, he reached for the latch. Roundy stepped in. He glanced at the gun.

"Getting scary, Mike?" he queried. "Things are happening!"

"I know."

Mike went on to explain what he had overheard, and Roundy's face turned serious. "Mike, did you ever hear of Dave Lenaker?"

Bastian looked up. "You mean, the Colo-

rado gunman?"

"That's the one. He's headed this way. Ben Curry just got word that Lenaker's on his way to take over the Curry gang!"

"I thought he was one of Curry's ablest lieutenants?"

Roundy shrugged. "He was, Mike, but the word has gone out that the old man is losing his grip, and outlaws are quick to sense a thing like that. Lenaker never had any use for Perrin, and he's most likely afraid that Perrin will climb into the saddle. Dave Lenaker's a holy terror, too."

"Does Dad Curry know?" Mike said.

"Yeah," Roundy answered. "He's some wrought up, too. He was figuring on being away for a few days, on one of those trips he takes to Red Wall. Now he can't go."

MORNING came, cool and clear. Mike Bastian could feel disaster in the air, and he dressed hurriedly and headed for the bunkhouse. Few of the men were eating, and those few were silent. He knew they were all aware of impending change. He was finishing his coffee when Kerb Perrin came in.

Instantly, Mike was on guard. Perrin walked with a strut, and his eyes were bright and confident. He glanced at Bastion, faintly amused, then sat down at the table and began to eat.

Roundy came in, and then Doc Sawyer. Mike dallied over his coffee, and a few minutes later was rewarded by seeing Ducrow come in with Kiefer, followed in a few mintes by Rocky Clatt, Monson, and Panelli.

Suddenly, with the cup half to his mouth, Mike recalled with a shock that this was the group Perrin planned to use on his raid on the Ragan ranch! That could mean the raid would come off today!

He looked up to see Roundy suddenly push back his chair and leave his breakfast unfinished. The old woodsman hurried outside and vanished.

Mike put down his own cup and got up. Then he stopped, motionless. The hard muzzle of a gun was prodding him in the back, and a voice was saying:

"Don't move!"

The voice was that of Fernandez, and Mike saw Perrin smiling.

"Sorry to surprise you, Bastian," Perrin said. "But with Lenaker on the road we had to move fast. By the time he gets here I'll be in the saddle. Some of the boys wanted to kill you, but I figured you'd be a good talking point with the Old Man. He'd be a hard kernel to dig out of that stone shell of his, without you. But with you for an argument, he'll come out, all right!"

"Have you gone crazy, Perrin? You can't get away with this!"

"I am, though. You see, Rigger Molina left this morning with ten of his boys to work a little job they heard of. In fact, they are on their way to knock over the gold train."

"The gold train?" Bastian exclaimed. "Why, that was *my* job! He doesn't even know the plan made for it. Or the information I've got."

Perrin smiled triumphantly. "I traded with him. I told him to give me a free hand here, and he could have the gold train. I neglected to tell him about the twelve guards riding with it, or the number with shotguns. In fact, I told him only five guards would be along. I think that will take care of Rigger for me."

Perrin turned abruptly. "Take his guns and tie his hands behind his back, then shove him out into the street. I want the Old Man to see him."

"What about him?" Kiefer demanded, pointing a gun at Doc Sawyer.

"Leave him alone. We may need a doctor, and he knows where his bread is buttered."

Confused and angry, Mike Bastian was shoved out into the warm morning sun, then jerked around to face up the canyon toward the stone house.

Suddenly, fierce triumph came over him. Perrin would have a time getting the old man out of that place. The sunlight was shining down the road from over the house, full into their faces. The only approach to the house was up thirty steps of stone, overlooked by an upper window of the house. From that window, and the doorway, the entire settlement could be commanded by an expert rifleman.

Ben Curry had thought of everything. The

front and back doors of every building in the settlement could be commanded easily from his stronghold.

Perrin crouched behind a pile of sandbags hastily thrown up near the door of the store.

"Come on down, Curry!" he shouted. "Give yourself up or we'll kill Bastian!"

THERE was no answer from up the hill. Mike felt cold and sick in the stomach. Wind touched his hair and blew a strand down over his face. He stared up at the stone house and could see no movement, hear no response.

"Come on out!" Perrin roared again. "We know you're there! Come out or we'll kill your son!"

Still no reply.

"He don't hear you," Clatt said. "Maybe he's still asleep. Let's rush the place."

"You rush it," Kiefer said. "Let me watch!"

Despite his helplessness, Mike felt a sudden glow of satisfaction. Old Ben Curry was a wily fighter. He knew that once he showed himself or spoke, their threat would take force. It was useless to kill Bastian unless Curry was watching them.

Perrin had been so sure Curry would come out rather than sacrifice Mike, and now they were not even sure he was hearing them! Nor, Mike knew suddenly, was anybody sure Ben would come out even if they did warn him Mike would be killed.

"Come on out!" Perrin roared. "Give yourself up and we'll give you and Bastian each a horse and a half-mile start! Otherwise, you both die! We've got dynamite!"

Mike chuckled. Dynamite wasn't going to do them much good. There was no way to get close to that stone house, backed up against the mountain as it was.

"Perrin," he said, "You've played the fool. Curry doesn't care whether I live or die. He won't come out of there, and there's no way you can get at him. All he's got to do is sit tight and wait until Dave Lenaker gets here. He will make a deal with Dave then, and where will you be?"

"Shut up!" Perrin bellowed. But for the first time he seemed to be aware that his plan was not working. "He'll come out, all right!"

"Let's open fire on the place," Ducrow suggested. "Or rush it like Clatt suggested!"

"Hell!" Kiefer was disgusted. "Let's take what we can lay hands on and get out! There's two thousand head of cattle down in those bottoms. Rigger's gone, Lenaker's not here yet. Let's take what we can and get out."

"Take pennies when there's millions up there in that stone house?" Perrin demanded. His face swelled in anger and the veins stood out on his forehead. "That strong room has gold in it! Stacks of money! I know it's there. With all that at hand, would you run off with a few cattle?"

Kiefer was silent but unconvinced.

Standing in the dusty street, Mike looked up at the stone house. All the loyalty and love he felt for the old man up there in that house came back with a rush. Whatever he was, good or bad, he owed to Ben Curry. Perhaps Curry had reared him for a life of crime, for outlawry, but to Ben Curry it was not a bad life. He lived like a feudal lord, and had respect for no law he did not make himself.

Wrong he might be, but he had given the man that was Mike Bastian a start. Suddenly, Mike knew that he could never have been an outlaw, that it was not in him to steal and rob and kill. But that did not mean he could be unloyal to the old man who had reared him and given him a home when he had none.

He was suddenly, fiercely proud of that old man up there alone. Like a cornered grizzly, he would fight to the death. He, Mike Bastian, might die here in the street, but he hoped old Ben Curry would stay in his stone shell and defeat them all.

Kerb Perrin was stumped. He had made his plan quickly when he'd heard Dave Lenaker was on his way here, for he knew that if Lenaker arrived it might well turn into a bloody four-cornered fight. But with Molina out of the way, he, Perrin, might take over from Ben Curry before Lenaker arrived, and kill Lenaker and the men he brought with him in an ambush.

HE HAD been sure that Ben Curry would reply, that he might give himself up, or at least show himself, and Perrin had a sniper concealed to pick him off if he moved into

the open. That he would get nothing but silence, he could not believe.

Mike Bastian stood alone in the center of the street. There was simply nothing he could do. At any moment Perrin might decide to have him killed where he stood. With his hands tied behind him, he was helpless. Mike wondered what had happened to Roundy? The old mountain man had risen suddenly from the table and vanished. Could he be in league with Perrin?

That was impossible. Roundy had always been Ben Curry's friend, and had never liked anything about Kerb Perrin.

"All right," Perrin said suddenly, "we'll hold Bastian. He's still a good argument. Some men will stay here, and the rest of us will make that raid on the Ragan outfit. I've an idea that when we come back, Curry will be ready to talk business."

VI

BASTIAN was led back from the street and thrown into a room in the rear of the store. There his feet were tied and he was left in darkness.

His mind was in a turmoil. If Perrin's men hit the ranch now they would take Drusilla and Juliana! He well knew how swiftly they would strike, and how helpless any ordinary ranch would be against them. And there he was tied hand and foot, helpless to do anything!

He heaved his body around and fought the ropes that bound him, until sweat streamed from his body. Even then, with his wrists torn by his struggles against the rawhide thongs that made him fast, he did not stop. There was nothing to aid him—no nail, no sharp corner, nothing at all.

The room was built of thin boards nailed to two-by-fours. He rolled himself around until he could get his back against the boards, trying hard to remember where the nails were.

Bracing himself as best he could, he pushed his back against the wall. He bumped against it until his back was sore. But with no effect.

Outside, all was still. Whether they had gone, he did not know. Yet if Perrin had not gone on his raid, he would be soon leaving. However, if he, Mike, could escape and find Curry's private route across the river, he might beat them to it.

He wondered where Doc Sawyer was. Perhaps he was afraid of what Perrin might do if he tried to help. Where was Roundy?

Just when he had all but given up, he had an idea—a solution, so simple that he cursed himself for not thinking of it before. Mike rolled over and got up on his knees and reached back with his bound hands for his spurs. Fortunately, he was wearing boots instead of the moccasins he wore in the woods. By wedging one spur against the other, he succeeded in holding the rowel almost immovable, and then he began to chafe the rawhide with the prongs of the rowel.

Desperately he sawed, until every muscle was crying for relief. As he stopped he heard the rattle of horses' hoofs. They were just going! Then he had a fighting chance if he could get free and get his hands on a gun!

He knew he was making headway for he could feel the notch he had already cut in the rawhide. Suddenly footsteps sounded outside. Fearful whoever was there would guess what he was doing, Mike rolled over on his side.

The door opened and Snake Fernandez came in. In his hand he held a knife. His shoulder was bandaged crudely but tightly, and the knife was held in his left hand. He came in and closed the door.

Mike stared, horror mounting within him. Perrin was gone, and Snake Fernandez was moving toward him, smiling wickedly.

"You think you shoot Pablo Fernandez, eh?" the outlaw said, leering. "Now, we see who shoots! I am going to cut you to little pieces! I am going to cut you very slowly!"

Bastian lay on his shoulder and stared at Fernandez. There was murder in the breed's eyes, and all the Yaqui in him was coming to the fore. The man stooped over him and pricked him with the knife. Clamping his jaws, Mike held himself tense.

Rage mounted in the Yaqui. He leaned closer. "You do not jump, eh? I make you jump!"

He stabbed down hard with the knife, and Mike whipped over on his shoulder-blades

and kicked out wickedly with his bound feet. The movement caught the killer by surprise. Mike's feet hit him on the knees and knocked him rolling. With a lunge, Mike rolled over and jerked at the ropes that bound him.

SOMETHING snapped, and he jerked again. Like a cat the killer was on his feet now, circling warily. Desperately, Mike pulled at the ropes, turning on his shoulders to keep his feet toward Fernandez. Suddenly he rolled over and hurled himself at the Mexican's legs, but Fernandez jerked back and stabbed.

Mike felt a sliver of pain run along his arms, then he rolled to his feet and jerked wildly at the thongs. His hands came loose suddenly and he hurled himself at Fernandez's legs, grabbing one ankle.

Fernandez came down hard and Bastian jerked at the leg, then scrambled to get at him. One hand grasped the man's wrist, the other his throat. With all the power that was in him, Mike shut down on both hands.

Fernandez fought like an injured wildcat, but Mike's strength was too great. Gripping the throat with his left hand, Mike slammed the Mexican's head against the floor again and again, his throttling grip freezing tighter and tighter.

The outlaw's face went dark with blood, and his struggles grew weaker. Mike let go of his throat hold suddenly and slugged him three times on the chin with his fist.

Jerking the knife from the unconscious man's hands, Mike slashed the thongs that bound his own ankles. He got to his feet shakily. Glancing down at the sprawled-out Fernandez, he hesitated. The man was not wearing a gun, but must have had one. It could be outside the door. Easing to the door, Mike opened it a crack.

The street was deserted as far as he could see. His hands felt awkward from their long constraint, and he worked his fingers to loosen them up. There was no gun in sight, so he pushed the door wider. Fernandez's gun-belts hung over the chair on the end of the porch.

He had taken two steps toward them when a man stepped out of the bunkhouse. The fellow had a toothpick lifted to his lips, but when he saw Mike Bastian he let out a yelp of surprise and went for his gun.

It was scarcely fifteen paces and Mike threw the knife *under-handed*, pitching it point first off the palm of his hand. It flashed in the sun as the fellow's gun came up. Then Mike could see the haft protruding from the man's middle section.

The fellow screamed and, dropping the gun, clutched at the knife hilt in an agony of fear. His breath came in horrid gasps which Mike could hear as he grabbed Fernandez' guns and belted them on. Then he lunged for the mess hall, where his own guns had been taken from him. Shoving open the door, he sprang inside, gun in hand.

Then he froze. Doc Sawyer was standing there smiling, and Doc had a shotgun held on four of Perrin's men. He looked up with relief.

"I was hoping you would escape!" he said. "I didn't want to kill these men, and didn't know how to go about tying them up by myself."

Mike caught up his own guns, removed Fernandez' gun-belts and strapped on his own. Then he shoved the outlaw's guns inside the waistband of his pants.

"Down on the floor!" he ordered. "I'll tie them, and fast!"

It was the work of only a few minutes to have the four outlaws bound hand and foot. He gathered up their guns.

"Where's Roundy?" he asked.

"I haven't seen him since he left here," Doc said. "I've been wondering."

"Let's go up to the house. We'll get Ben Curry, and then we'll have things under control in a hurry."

Together, they went out the back door and walked swiftly down the line of buildings. Mike took off his hat and sailed it into the brush, knowing he could be seen from the stone house and hoping that Ben Curry would recognize him. Sawyer was excited, but trying to appear calm. He had been a gambler, and while handy with guns, was not a man accustomed to violence. Always before in gun play, he had been a by-stander rather than an active participant.

Side by side, gambling against a shot from someone below, they went up the stone stairs.

THERE was no sound from within the house. They walked into the wide living room and glanced around. There was no sign of anyone. Then Mike saw a broken box of rifle shells.

"He's been around here!" he said. Then he looked up and shouted, "Dad!"

A muffled cry reached them, and Mike was out of the room and up another staircase. He entered the room at the top, then froze in his tracks. Sawyer was behind him, now.

This was the fortress room, a heavy-walled stone room that had water trickling from a spring in the wall of the cliff and running down a stone trough and out through a pipe. There was food stored here, and plenty of ammunition.

The door was heavy and could be locked and barred from within. The walls of this room were all of four feet thick, and nothing short of dynamite could have blasted a way in.

This was Ben Curry's last resort, and he was here, now. But he was sprawled on the floor, his face contorted with pain.

"Broke my leg!" he panted. "Too heavy! Tried to move too—fast! Slipped on the steps, dragged myself up here!" He looked up at Mike. "Good for you, son! I was afraid they had killed you. You got away by yourself?"

"Yes, Dad."

Sawyer had dropped to his knees, and now he looked up.

"This is a bad break, Mike," he said "He won't be able to move."

"Get me a bed where I can see out of that window." Ben Curry's strength seemed to flow back with his son's presence. "I'll stand them off. You and me, Mike, we can do it!"

"Dad," Mike said, "I can't stay. I've got to go."

Ben Curry's face went gray with shock, then slowly the blood flowed back into it. Bastian dropped down beside him.

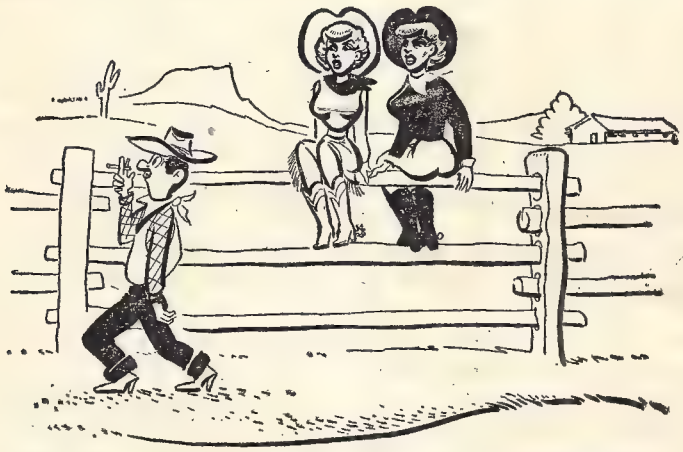
"Dad, I know where Perrin's gone. He's going to make a raid on the Ragan ranch. He wants the cattle and the women."

The old man lunged so mightily that Sawyer cried out and tried to push him back. Before he could speak, Mike said:

"Dad, you must tell me about the secret crossing of the Colorado that you know. I must beat them to the ranch."

Ben Curry's expression changed to one of vast relief, and then quick calculation. He nodded.

"You could do it, but it'll take tall riding!" Quickly, he outlined the route, then added, "Now listen! At the river there's an old Navajo. He keeps some horses for me, and



"After last night I know why he calls his ranch the Bar Nothing!"

he has six of the finest animals ever bred. You cross that river and get a horse from him. He knows about you."

Mike got up. "Make him comfortable, Doc. Do all you can."

Sawyer stared at Mike. "What about Dave Lenaker? He'll kill us all!"

"I'll take care of Lenaker!" Curry flared. "I'm not dead by a danged sight! I'll show that renegade where he heads in. The moment he comes up that street, I'm going to kill him!" He looked at Mike again. "Son, maybe I've done wrong to raise you like I have, but if you kill Kerb Perrin or Lenaker you would be doing the West a favor. If I don't get Dave Lenaker, you may have to. So remember this: *Watch his left hand!*"

Mike ran down the steps and stopped in his own room to grab his .44 Winchester. Outside, it was the work of a minute to throw a saddle on a horse, and then he hit the trail. Ben Curry and Doc Sawyer could, if necessary, last for days in the fortresslike room—unless, somehow, dynamite was pitched in through the window. He would have to get to the Ragan ranch, and get back here as soon as possible.

MIKE BASTIAN left the stable and wheeled the gray he was riding into the long winding trail through the strands of ponderosa and fir. The horse was in fine fettle and ready for the trail, and he let it out. His mind was leaping over the trail, turning each bend, trying to see how it must lay.

This was all new country to him, for he was heading southwest now into the wild, unknown region toward the great canyons of the Colorado, a region he had never traversed and, except for old Ben Curry, perhaps had never been crossed by any white man.

How hard the trail would be on the horse, Mike could not guess, but he knew he must ride fast and keep going. His route was the shorter, but Kerb Perrin had a lead on him, and would be hurrying to make his strike and return.

Patches of snow still hid themselves around the roots of the brush and in the hollows under the end of some giant deadfall. The air was crisp and chill, but growing warmer, and by afternoon it would be hot in the sunlight. The wind of riding whipped his black hair, and he ran the horse down a long path bedded deep with pine needles, then turned at a blazed tree and went out across the arid top of a plateau.

This was the strange land he loved, the fiery, heat-blasted land of the sun. Riding along the crest of a long ridge, he looked out over a long valley dotted with mesquite and sagebrush. Black dots of cattle grazing offered the only life beyond the lonely, lazy swing of a high-soaring buzzard.

He saw the white rock he had been told to look for, and turned the free-running horse into a cleft that led downward. They moved slowly here, for it was a steep slide down the side of the mesa and out on the long roll of the hill above the valley.

Time and time again Mike's hands patted his guns, as if to reassure himself they were there. His thoughts leaped ahead, trying to foresee what would happen. Would he reach the ranch first? Would he arrive only to find the buildings burned and the girls gone?

He knew only that he must get there first, that he must face the raiding outlaws and that at all costs he must kill Kerb Perrin and Ducrow. Without them the others might run, might not choose to fight it out. Mike had an idea that, without Perrin, they would scatter to the four winds.

Swinging along the hillside, he took a trail that led again to a plateau top and ran off through the sage, heading for the smoky-blue distance of the canyon.

VII

LOSING all track of time and distance, Mike's mind leaped ahead to the river and the crossing, and beyond it to Ragan's V Bar Ranch. Down steep trails through the great, broken cliffs heaped high with the piled-up stone of ages. Down through the wild, weird jumble of boulders and across the flat topland that smelled of sage an piñon, he kept the horse moving.

Then suddenly he was once more in the forests of the Kiabab. The dark pines closed around him and he rode on in the vast still-

ness of virgin timber, the miles falling behind, the trail growing dim before him.

Then as suddenly the forest split aside and he was on the rim of the canyon—an awful blue immensity yawning before him that made him draw the gray to a halt in gasping wonder. Far out over that vast, misty blue rose islands or red sandstone, islands that were laced and crossed by bands of purple and yellow. The sunset was gleaming on the vast plateaus and buttes and peaks with a ruddy glow, fading into the opaques of the deeper canyon.

The gray was beaten and weary now. Mike turned the mount toward a break in the plateau and rode down it, giving the animal its head. They came out upon a narrow trail that hung above a vast gorge, its bottom lost in the darkness of gathering dusk. The gray stumbled on, seeming to know its day was almost done.

Dozing in the saddle, almost two hours later, Mike Bastian felt the horse come to a halt. He jerked his head up and opened his eyes. He could feel the dampness of a deep canyon and could hear the thundering roar of the mighty river as it charged through the rock-walled slit. In front of him was a square of light.

"Halloo, the house!" he called.

He swung down as the door opened.

"Who's there?" a voice cried out.

"Mike Bastian!" he said, moving toward the house with long, swinging strides. "For Ben Curry!"

The man backed into the house. He was an ancient Navajo, but his eyes were keen and sharp.

"I want a horse," Mike said.

"You can't cross the river tonight." The Navajo spoke English well. "It is impossible!"

"There'll be a moon later," Mike answered. "When it comes up, I'm going across."

The Indian looked at him, then shrugged. "Then eat," he said. "You'll need it."

"There are horses?"

"Horses?" The Navajo chuckled. "The best a man ever saw! Do you suppose Ben Curry would have horses here that were not the best? But they are on the other side of the stream, and safe enough. My brother is with them."

Mike slumped into a seat. "Take care of my horse, will you? I've most killed him."

When the Indian was gone, Mike slumped over on the table, burying his head in his arms. In a moment he was asleep, dreaming wild dreams of a mad race over a strange misty-blue land with great crimson islands, riding a splendid black horse and carrying a girl in his arms. He awakened with a start. The old Indian was sitting by the fireplace, and he looked up.

"You'd better eat," he said. "The moon is rising."

They went out together, walking, down the path to the water's edge. As the moon shone down into the canyon, Mike stared at the tumbling stream in consternation. Nothing living could swim in that water! It would be impossible.

"How do you cross?" he demanded. "No horse could swim that! And a boat wouldn't get fifty feet before it would be dashed to pieces!"

The Indian chuckled. "That isn't the way we cross it. You are right in saying no boat could cross here, for there is no landing over there, and the canyon is so narrow that the water piles up back of the narrows and comes down with a great rush."

MIKE looked at him again. "You talk like an educated man," he said. "I don't understand."

The Navajo shrugged. "I was for ten years with a missionary, and after traveling with him as an interpreter he took me back to the States, where I stayed with him for two years. Then I lived in Sante Fe."

He was leading the way up a steep path that skirted the cliff but was wide enough to walk comfortably. Opposite them, the rock wall of the canyon lifted and the waters of the tumbling river roared down through the narrow chasm.

"Ben Curry does things well, as you shall see," the guide said. "It took him two years of effort to get this bridge built."

Mike stared. "Across there?"

"Yes. A bridge for a man with courage. It is a rope bridge, made fast to iron rings sunk in the rock."

Mike Bastian halted on the rocky ledge at the end of the trail and looked out across the gorge. In the pale moonlight he could see two slim threads trailing across the canyon high above the tumbling water. Just two ropes, and one of them four feet above the other.

"You mean," he said, "that Ben Curry crossed on *that?*"

"He did. I have seen him cross that bridge a dozen times, at least."

"Have you crossed it?"

The Navajo shrugged. "Why should I? The other side is the same as this, is it not? There is nothing over there that I want."

Mike looked at the slender strands, and then he took hold of the upper rope and tentatively put a foot on the lower one. Slowly, carefully, he eased out above the raging waters. One slip and he would be gone, for no man could hope to live in those angry flood waters. He slid his foot along, then the other, advancing his hand holds as he moved. Little by little, he worked his way across the canyon.

He was trembling when he got his feet in the rocky cavern on the opposite side, and so relieved to be safely across that he scarcely was aware of the old Indian who sat there awaiting him.

The Navajo got up, and without a word started down the trail. He quickly led Mike to a cabin built in the opening of a dry, branch canyon. Tethered before the door of the cabin was a huge bay stallion.

Waving at the Indian, Mike swung into the saddle and the bay turned, taking to the trail as if eager to be off.

Would Perrin travel at night? Mike doubted it, but it was possible, so he kept moving himself. The trail led steadily upward, winding finally out of the canyon to the plateau.

The bay stallion seemed to know the trail; it was probable that Curry had used this horse himself. It was a splendid animal, big and fast. Letting the horse have his head, Mike felt the animal gather his legs under him. Then he broke into a long, swinging lope that literally ate up the space. How long the horse could hold the speed he did not know, but it was a good start.

It was at least a ten-hour ride to the Ragan V-Bar Ranch.

The country was rugged and wild. Several times startled deer broke and ran before him, and there were many rabbits. Dawn was breaking faintly in the east now, and shortly after daybreak he stopped near a pool of melted snow water and made coffee. Then he remounted the rested stallion and raced on. . . .

DRUSILLA RAGAN brushed her hair thoughtfully, then pinned it up. Outside, she could hear her mother moving about, and the Mexican girls who helped around the house whenever they were visiting. Julie was up, Dru knew, and had been up for hours. She was outside talking to that blond cowhand from New Mexico, the one Voyle Ragan had hired to break horses.

Suddenly she heard Julie's footsteps, and then the door opened.

"Aren't you ready yet?" Julie asked. "I'm famished!"

"I'll be along in a minute," Dru said, then asked, as Julie turned to go, "What did you think of him, Julie? That cowboy who got the buckboard for us? Wasn't he the handsomest thing?"

"Oh, you mean Mike Bastian?" Julie said. "I was wondering why you were mooning around in here. Usually you're the first one up. Yes, I expect he is good-looking. But did you see the way he looked when you mentioned Uncle Voyle? He acted so strange!"

"I wonder if Uncle Voyle knows anything about him? Let's ask!"

"You ask," Julie replied, laughing. "He's *your* problem!"

Voyle Ragan was a tall man, but lean and without Ben Curry's weight. He was already seated at the breakfast table when the girls came in.

Dru was no sooner in her seat than she put her question. Voyle's face became a mask.

"Mike Bastian?" he said thoughtfully. "I don't know. Where'd you meet him?"

The girls explained, and he nodded.

"In Weaver?" Voyle Ragan knew about the gold train, and his eyes narrowed. "I think I know who he is, but I've never seen him that I know of. You probably won't see

him again, because most of those riders from up in the Strip stay there most of the time. They are a wild bunch."

"On the way down here," Julie said, "the man who drove was telling us that outlaws live up there."

"Could be. It's wild enough." Voyle Ragan lifted his head, listening. For a moment he had believed he heard horses. But it was too soon for Ben to be coming. If anyone else came, he would have to get rid of them, and quickly.

He heard the sound again, then saw the cavalcade of horsemen riding into the yard. Voyle Ragan came to his feet abruptly.

"Stay here!" he snapped.

His immediate thought was of a posse, and then he saw Kerb Perrin. He had seen Perrin many times, although Perrin had never met him. Slowly, the outlaw moved up to the door, plainly uncertain of his course. These were Ben's men, but Ben had always told Voyle that none of them was aware that he owned this ranch or that Voyle was his brother.

"Howdy!" Voyle said. "What can I do for you?"

Kerb Perrin swung down from his horse. Behind him Monson, Ducrow and Kiefer were getting down.

"You can make as little trouble as you know how," Perrin said, his eyes gleaming. "All you got to do is stay out of the way. Where are the girls? We want them, and we want your cattle."

"What is this?" Voyle demanded. He wasn't wearing a gun; it was hanging from a clothes-tree in the next room. "You men can't get away with anything here!"

Perrin's face was ugly as he strode toward the door. "That's what *you* think!" he sneered.

The tall old man blocked his way, and Perrin shoved him aside. Perrin had seen the startled faces of the girls inside and knew the men behind him were spreading out.

Ragan swung suddenly and his fist struck Perrin in the mouth. The gunman staggered, his face went white with fury.

A Mexican started from the corral toward the house and Ducrow wheeled, firing from the hip. The man cried out and sprawled over on the hard-packed earth, moaning out his agony.

Perrin had drawn back slowly, his face ugly with rage, a slow trickling of blood from his lips. "For that, I'll kill you!" he snarled at Ragan.

"Not yet, Perrin!"

The voice that said that had a cold ring of challenge, and Kerb Perrin went numb with shock. He turned slowly—to see Mike Bastian standing at the corner of the corral!

VIII

KERB PERRIN was profoundly shocked. He had left Bastian a prisoner at Toadstool Canyon. Since he was free now, that could mean that Ben Curry was back in the saddle. It could mean a lot of things. An idea came with startling clarity to him. He had to kill Mike Bastian, and kill him now!

"You men have made fools of yourselves!" Bastian's voice was harsh. He stood there in his gray buckskins, his feet a little apart, his black hair rippled by the wind. "Ben Curry's not through! And this place is under his protection. He sent me to stop you, and stop you I shall! Now, any of you who don't want to fight Ben Curry, get out while the getting is good!"

"Stay where you are!" Perrin snapped at his men. "I'll settle with you, Bastian—Right now!"

His hand darted down in the sweeping, lightning-fast draw for which he was noted. His lips curled in sneering contempt. Yet as his gun lifted, he saw flame blossom from a gun in Bastian's hand and a hard object slugged him. Perplexed and disturbed, he took a step backward. Whatever had hit him had knocked his gun out of line. He turned it toward Bastian again. The gun in Mike's hand blasted a second time, and a third.

Perrin could not seem to get his own gun leveled. His mind wouldn't function right, and he felt a strangeness in the stomach. His legs . . .

Suddenly he was on his knees. He tried to get up and saw a dark pool forming near his knees. He must have slipped, he must have . . .

That was blood! It was *his* blood!

From far off he heard shouts, then a scream, then the pound of horses' hooves. Then the thunder of those hooves seemed to sweep through his brain and he was lying face-down in the dirt. And then he knew! Mike Bastian had beaten him to the draw. Mike Bastian had shot him three times. Mike Bastian had killed him!

He started to scream a protest—but then just laid there on his face, his cheek against the bloody ground, his mouth half open.

Kerb Perrin was dead.

In the instant that Perrin had reached for his gun, Ducrow suddenly cut and ran toward the corner of the house. Kiefer, seeing his leader gunned down then, made a wild grab for his own weapon. The tall old man in the doorway killed him with a hastily caught-up rifle.

The others broke for their horses. Mike rushed after them and got off one more shot as they raced out of the yard. It was then he heard the scream, and whirled.

Ducrow had acted with suddenness. He had come to the ranch for women, and women he intended to have. Even as Bastian was killing Perrin, he had rushed for the house. Darting around the corner where two saddle horses were waiting, he was just in time to see Juliana, horrified at the killing, run back into her bedroom. The bedroom window beside Ducrow was open, and the outlaw reached through and grabbed her.

Julie went numb with horror. Ducrow threw her across Perrin's saddle, and with a piggin' string, which he always carried from his days as a cowhand, he jerked her ankles together under the horse's belly.

Instantly, he was astride the other horse. Julie screamed; then. Wheeling, he struck her across the mouth with a backhand blow. He caught up the bridle of her horse, drove in spurs to his own mount, and they went out of the ranch yard at a dead run.

When Mike heard Julie scream he hesitated only an instant, then ran for the corner of the house. By the time he rounded the corner, gun in hand, the two horses were streaking into the piñons. In the dust, he could only catch a glimpse of the riders. He turned and walked back.

That had been a woman's scream, but Dru was in the doorway and he had seen her. Only then did he recall Julie. He sprinted for the doorway.

"Where's Julie?" he shouted to Drusilla. "Look through the house!"

HE GLANCED around quickly. Kerb Perrin, mouth agape, lay dead on the hard earth of the ranch yard. Kiefer lay near the body of the Mexican Ducrow had killed. The whole raid had taken no more than two or three minutes.

Voyle Ragan dashed from the house. "Julie's gone!" he yelled hoarsely. "I'll get a horse!"

Bastian caught his arm. His own dark face was tense and his eyes wide.

"You'll stay here!" he said harshly. "Take care of the women and the ranch. I'll go after Julie."

Dru ran from the house. "She's gone, Mike—she's gone! They have her!"

Mike walked rapidly to his horse, thumbing shells into his gun. Dru Ragan started to mount another horse.

"You go back to the house!" he ordered.

Dru's chin came up. In that moment she reminded him of Ben Curry.

"She's my sister!" Dru cried. "When we find her, she may need a woman's care!"

"All right," Mike said. "But you'll have to do some riding!"

He wheeled the big bay around. The horse Dru had mounted was one of Ben Curry's beautiful horses, bred not only for speed but for staying power.

Mike's mind leaped ahead. Would Ducrow get back with the rest of them? Would he join Monson and Clatt? If he did, it was going to be a problem. Ducrow was a handy man with a sixgun, but the three of them, or more if they were all together, would make an open attack on them nothing less than suicide.

He held the bay horse's pace down. He had taken a swift glance at the hoof marks of the horses he was trailing, and knew them both.

Would Ducrow head back for Toadstool Canyon? Bastian considered that as he rode, and decided the man would not. Ducrow did

not know that Julie was Ben Curry's daughter. But from what Mike had said, Ducrow had cause to believe that Ben was back in the saddle again. And men who went off on rebel raids were not lightly handled by Curry. Besides, Ducrow would want, if possible, to keep the girl for himself.

Mike had been taught by Roundy that there was more to trailing a man than following his tracks, for you trailed him down the devious paths of the mind as well. He tried to put himself in Ducrow's place.

The man could not have much food, yet on his many outlaw forays he must have learned the country and would know where there was water. Also, there were many ranch hangouts of the outlaws that Ducrow would know. He would probably go to one of them. Remembering the maps that Ben Curry had shown him and made him study, Mike knew the locations of all those places.

The trail turned suddenly off through the chaparral, and Mike turned to follow. Drusilla had said nothing since they started. Once he glanced at her. Even now, with her face dusty and tear-streaked, she was lovely. Her eyes were fastened on the trail, and he noted with a little thrill of satisfaction that she had brought her rifle along.

Dru certainly was her father's daughter, a fit companion for any man.

Bastian turned his attention to the trail. Despite the small lead he had, Ducrow had vanished. That taught Mike something of the nature of the man he was tracing; Ducrow's years of outlawry had taught him how to disappear when need be. The method was simple. Turning off into the thicker desert growth, he had ridden down into a sandy wash.

Here, due to the deep sand and the tracks of horses and cattle, it was a problem and it took Mike several minutes to decide whether Ducrow had gone up or down the wash. Then he caught a hoofprint, and they were off, winding up the sandy wash. Yet Mike knew they would not be in that sand for long. Ducrow would wish to save his horses' strength.

TRUE enough, the trail soon turned out. From then on, it was a nightmare. Ducrow ran off in a straight-away, then turned at right angles, weaved about in the sandy desert. Several times he had stopped to brush out portions of his trail, but Roundy had not spent years of training in vain and Mike Bastian hung to the trail like a bloodhound.

Dru, riding behind him, saw him get off and walk, saw him pick up sign where she could see nothing.

Hours passed and the day slowly drew toward an end. Dru, her face pale, realized night would come before they found her sister. She was about to speak, when Mike looked up at her.

"You wanted to come," he said, "so you'll have to take the consequences. I'm not stopping because of darkness."

"How can you trail them?"

"I can't." He shrugged. "But I think I know where they are going. We'll take a chance."

Darkness closed around them. Mike's shirt stuck to his body with sweat, and a chill wind of the higher plateaus blew down through the trees. He rode on, his face grim and his body weary from long hours in the saddle. The big bay kept on, seemingly unhurt by those long hours of riding. Time and again he patted the big horse, and Dru could hear him talking to it in a low voice. Suddenly at the edge of a clearing, he reined in.

"Dru," he said, "there's a ranch ahead. It's an outlaw hangout. There may be one or more men there. Ducrow may be there. I am going up to find out."

"I'll come, too," the girl said impulsively.

"You'll stay here!" His voice was flat. "When I whistle, then you come. Bring my horse along."

He swung down and, slipping off his boots, pulled on his moccasins. Then he went forward into the darkness. Alone, she watched him vanish toward the dark hulk of the buildings. Suddenly a light came on—too soon for him to have arrived.

Mike weaved his way through sage and mesquite to the corral, and worked his way along the bars. Horses were there but it was too dark to make them out. One of them stood near and, putting his hand through the bars, he touched the horse's flank. It was

damp with sweat.

His face tightened.

The horse stepped away, snorting. As if waiting for just that sound, a light went on in the house. A lamp had been lighted. But by that time Mike was at the side of the house, flattened against the wall, peering in.

He saw a heavy, square-faced man with a pistol in his hand. The man put the gun under a towel on the table, then began pacing around the room, waiting. Mike smiled grimly, walked around the house and stepped up on the porch. In his moccasins, he made no sound. He opened the door suddenly and stepped into the room.

IX

OBVIOUSLY the man in the house had been waiting for the sound of boots, or of horses, or the jingle of spurs. Even a knock. Mike Bastian's sudden appearance startled him. He straightened up from the table, his hand near the towel that covered the gun.

Bastian closed the door behind him. The man stared at the black-haired young man who faced him, stared with puckered brow. This man didn't look like a sheriff to him. Not with those tied-down guns, or in those gray buckskins stained with travel, and with no hat.

You're Walt Sutton," Mike snapped. "Get your hands off that table before I blow you wide open! Get 'em off!"

He jammed the muzzle of the gun into Sutton's stomach with such force that it doubled the man up.

Then he swept the towel from the gun.

"You fool!" he said sharply. "If you'd tried that, I'd have killed you!"

Sutton staggered back, his face gray. He had never even seen Mike's hand move.

"Who are you?" he gasped, struggling to get his wind back.

"I'm Mike Bastian, Ben Curry's foster son. He owns this ranch. He set you up here, gave you stock to get started with, now you doublecross him! Where's Ducrow?"

Sutton swallowed. "I haven't seen him!" he protested.

"You're a liar, Sutton! His horses are out in that corral. I could pistol-whip you, but I'm not going to. You're going to tell me where he is, and now, or I'm going to start shooting!"

Walt Sutton was unhappy. He knew Ducrow as one of Ben Curry's men who had come here before for fresh horses. He had never before seen this man who called himself Mike Bastian, yet so far as he knew, no one but Curry himself had ever known the true facts about this ranch. If this man was lying, how could he know?

"Listen, mister," he protested, "I don't want no trouble—least of all with old Ben. He did set me up here. Sure, I saw Ducrow, but he told me the law was after him."

"Do I look like the law?" Mike snapped. "He's kidnaped the daughter of a friend of Curry's, a niece of Voyle Ragans. I've got to find him."

"Kidnapped Voyle's niece? Gosh, mister, I wondered why he wanted two saddle horses!"

Mike whistled sharply. "Where'd he go?" he demanded then.

"Darned if I know," Sutton answered. "He come in here maybe an hour ago, wanted two saddle horses and a pack horse loaded with grub. He took two canteens then, and lit out."

Drusilla appeared now in the doorway, and Walt Sutton's eyes went to her.

"I know you," he said. "You're one of Voyle Ragan's nieces."

"She is," Mike said. "Ducrow's kidnaped the other one. I'm going to find him. Get us some grub, but fast!"

Mike paced restlessly while Sutton filled a pack and strapped it behind the saddle of one of the fresh horses he furnished them. The horses were some of those left at the ranch by Ben Curry's orders, and were good.

"No pack-horses," Mike had said. "We're traveling fast."

Now he turned to Sutton again. "You got any idea where Ducrow might be going?"

"Well—" Sutton licked his lips—"he'll kill me if he finds out I've said anything, but he did say something about Peach Meadow Canyon."

"Peach Meadow?" Bastian stared at Sutton. The canyon was almost a legend in the

Coconino country. "What did he ask you?"

"If I knew the trail in there, and if it was passable."

"What did you say?"

Sutton shrugged. "Well, I've heard tell of that canyon ever since I been in this country, and haven't seen any part of it. I've looked, all right. Who wouldn't look, if all they say is true?"

WHEN they were about to mount their horses, Mike put his hand on the girl's arm.

"Dru," he said, "it's going to be rough, so if you want to go back, say so."

"I wouldn't think of it!" she said firmly.

"Well, I won't say I'm sorry, because I'm not. I'll sure like having you beside me. In fact—" he hesitated, then rushed on—"it will be nice having you."

That was not what he meant to say, and Dru knew it. She looked at Mike for a moment, her eyes soft. He was tired now, and she could see how drawn his face was. She knew only a little of the ride he had made to reach them before Perrin's outlaws had showed up at the ranch.

When they were in the saddle, Mike explained a little of what he had in mind. "I doubt Ducrow will stop for anything now," he said. "There isn't a good hiding place within miles, so he'll head right for the canyon country. He may actually know something about Peach Meadow Canyon. If he does, he knows a perfect hideaway. Outlaws often stumble across places in their getaways that a man couldn't find in years if he looked for it."

"What is Peach Meadow Canyon?" Dru asked.

"It's supposed to be over near the river in one of the deep canyons that branch off from the Colorado. According to the story, a fellow found the place years ago, but the Spanish had been there before him, and the Indians before them. There are said to be old Indian ruins in the place, but no way to get into it from the plateau. The Indians found a way through some caves in the Coconino sandstone, and the Spanish are supposed to have reached it by boat.

"Anyway," he continued, "this prospector who found it said the climate was tropical, or almost. That it was in a branch canyon, that there was fresh water and a nice meadow. Somebody had planted some fruit trees, and when he went back he took a lot of peach pits and was supposed to have planted an orchard. Nobody ever saw him or it again, so the place exists only on his say-so. The Indians alive now swear they never heard of it. Ducrow might be trying to throw us off, or he might honestly know something."

For several miles the trail was simple. They were riding down the floor of a high-walled canyon from which there was no escape. Nevertheless, from time to time Bastian stopped and examined the sandy floor with matches. Always the tracks were there, and going straight down the canyon.

This was new country to Mike. He knew the altitude was gradually lessening, and believed they would soon emerge on the desert plateau that ran toward the canyon and finally lost itself on the edge of the pine forest.

When they had traveled about seven miles, the canyon ended abruptly and they emerged in a long valley. Mike reined in and swung down.

"Like it or not," he said, "here's where we stop. We can't have a fire, because from here it could be seen for miles. We don't want Ducrow to believe we stopped."

Mike spread his poncho on the sand and handed Dru a blanket. She was feeling the chill and gathered it close around her.

"Aren't you cold?" she said suddenly. "If we sat close together, we could share the blanket."

He hesitated, then sat down alongside her and pulled the blanket across his shoulders, grateful for the warmth. Leaning back against the rock, warmed by proximity and the blanket, they dozed a little.

Mike had loosened the girths and ground-hitched the horses. He wasn't worried about them straying off.

When the sky was just faintly gray, he opened his eyes. Dru's head was on his shoulder and she was sleeping. He could feel the rise and fall of her breathing against his body. He glanced down at her face, amazed that this could happen to him—that

he, Mike Bastian, foster son of an outlaw, could be sitting alone in the desert with this girl sleeping on his shoulder!

SOME movement of his must have awakened her, for her breath caught, and then she looked up. He could see the sleepy smile in her eyes and on her lips.

"I was tired!" She whispered the words, and made no effort to move her head from his shoulder. "You've nice shoulders," she said. "If we were riding anywhere else, I'd not want to move at all."

"Nor I." He glanced at the stars. "We'd better get up. I think we can chance a very small fire and a quick cup of coffee."

While he was breaking dried mesquite and greasewood, Dru got the pack open and dug out the coffee and some bread. There was no time for anything else.

The fire made but little light, shielded by the rocks and kept small, and there was less glow now due to the grayness of the sky. They ate quickly.

When they were in saddle again, he turned down the trail left by the two saddle horses and the pack-horse he was following. Sign was dim, but could be followed without dismounting. Dawn broke, and the sky turned red and gold, then blue. The sun lifted and began to take some of the chill from their muscles.

The trail crossed the valley, skirting an alkali lake, then dipped into the rocky wilderness that preceded the pine forest. He could find no signs of a camp. Julie, who lacked the fire and also the strength of Dru, must be almost dead with weariness, for Ducrow was not stopping. Certainly the man had more than a possible destination before him. In fact, the farther they rode, the more confident Mike was that the outlaw knew exactly where he was headed.

The pines closed around them and the trail became more difficult to follow. It was slow going, and much of it Mike Bastian walked. Suddenly he stopped, scowling.

The trail, faint as it had been, had vanished into thin air!

"Stay where you are," he told Dru. "I've got to look around a bit."

Mike studied the ground carefully. Then he walked back to the last tracks he had seen. Their own tracks did not cover them, as he had avoided riding over them in case he needed to examine the hoofprints once more.

Slowly Mike paced back and forth over the pine needles. Then he stopped and carefully studied the surrounding timber. It seemed to be absolutely uniform in appearance. Avoiding the trail ahead, he left the girl and circled into the woods, describing a slow circle around the horses.

There were no tracks.

He stopped, his brow furrowed. It was impossible to lose them after following so far—yet they were gone and they had left no trail. He walked back to the horses and Dru stared at him, her eyes wide.

"Wait a minute," he said as she began to speak. "I want to think."

He studied, inch by inch, the woods on his left, the trail ahead, and the trail on his right. Nothing offered a clue. The tracks of three horses had simply vanished as though the animals and their riders had been swallowed into space.

On the left the pines stood thick, and back inside the woods the brush was so dense as to allow no means of passing through it. That was out, then. He had studied that brush and had walked through those woods, and if a horseman did turn that way there would be no place to go.

The trail ahead was trackless, so it had to be on the right. Mike walked again to the woods on his right. He inched over the ground, yet there was nothing, no track, no indication that anything heavier than a rabbit had passed that way. It was impossible, yet it had happened.

"Could they have backtracked?" Dru asked suddenly. "Over their same trail?"

Mike shook his head. "There were no tracks," he said, "but those going ahead. I think—" He stopped dead still, then swore. "I'm a fool! A darned fool!" He grinned at her. "Lend me your hat."

PUZZLED, she removed her sombrero and handed it to him. He turned and, using the hat for a fan, began to wave it over the ground to let the wind disturb the surface needles. Patiently he worked over the area

around the last tracks seen, and then to the woods on both sides of the trail. Suddenly he stopped.

"Got it!" he said. "Here they are!"

Dru ran to him. He pointed to a track, then several more.

"Ducrow was smart," Mike explained. "He turned at right angles and rode across the open space, then turned back down the way he had come, riding over on the far side. Then he dismounted and, coming back, gathered pine needles from somewhere back in the brush and came along here, pressing the earth down and scattering the needles to make it seem there had been no tracks at all!"

Mounting again, they started back, and from time to time he dismounted to examine the trail. Suddenly the tracks ended and turned off into thick woods. Leading their horses, they followed.

"Move as quietly as you can," Mike said softly. "We may be close now. Or he may wait and try to ambush us."

"You think he knows we're following him?" Dru asked.

"Sure! And he knows I'm a tracker. He'll use every trick in the books now."

For awhile, the trail was not difficult to follow and they rode again. Mike Bastian could not take his mind from the girl who rode with him. What would she think when she discovered her father was an outlaw? That he was the mysterious leader of the biggest outlaw band in existence?

X

PINE trees thinned out, and before them was the vast blue and misty distance of the canyon. Mike slid to the ground and walked slowly forward on moccasined feet. There were a few scattered pines and the cracked and splintered rim of the canyon, breaking sharply off to fall away into the vast depths. Carefully he scouted the edge of the canyon, and when he saw the trail he stopped flat-footed and stared, his heart in his mouth.

Had they gone down *there?* He knelt on the rock. Yes, there was the scar of a horse's hoof. He walked out a little farther, looking down.

The cliff fell away for hundreds of feet without even a hump in the wall, then just a little farther along was the trail. It was a rocky ledge scarcely three feet wide that ran steeply down the side of the rock from the canyon's rim. On the left the wall, on the right the vast, astonishing emptiness of the canyon.

Thoughtfully, he walked back and explained.

"All right, Mike." Dru nodded. "If you're ready, I am."

He hesitated to bring the horses, but decided it would be the best thing. He drew his rifle from the saddle scabbard and jacked a shell into the chamber.

Dru looked at him, steady-eyed. "Mike, maybe he'll be waiting for us," she said. "We may get shot. Especially you."

Bastian nodded. "That could be," he agreed.

She came toward him. "Mike, who are you, what are you? Uncle Voyle seemed to know you, or about you, and that outlaw, Perrin. He knew you. Then I heard you say Ben Curry had sent you to stop them from raiding the ranch. Are you an outlaw, Mike?"

For as long as a man might have counted a slow ten, Mike stared out over the canyon, trying to make up his mind. Now, at this stage, there was only one thing he could say.

"No, Dru, not exactly, but I was raised by an outlaw," he explained. "Ben Curry brought me up like his own son, with the idea that I would take over the gang when he stepped out."

"You lived with them in their hideout?"

"When I wasn't out in the woods." He nodded. "Ben Curry had me taught everything—how to shoot, to track, to ride, even to open safes and locks."

"What's he like, this Ben Curry?" Dru asked.

"He's quite a man!" Mike Bastian said, smiling. "When he started outlawing, everybody was rustling a few cows, and he just went a step further and robbed banks and stages, or planned the robberies and directed them. I don't expect he really figured himself bad. He might have done a lot of other things, for he has brains. But he killed a

man—and then in getting away, he killed another. The first one was justified. The second one . . . Well, he was in a hurry."

"Are you apologizing for him?" Dru said quickly. "After all, he was an outlaw and a killer."

He glanced at her. "He was, yes. And I am not making any apologies for him, nor would he want them. He's a man who always stood on his own two feet. Maybe he was wrong, but there were the circumstances. And he was mighty good to me. I didn't have a home, any place to go, and he took me in and treated me right."

"Was he a big man, Mike? A big old man?"

He did not look her way. She knew, then?

"In many ways," he said, "he is one of the biggest men I know . . . We'd better get started."

It was like stepping off into space, yet the horses took it calmly enough. They were mountain bred and would go anywhere as long as they could get a foothold on something.

The red maw of the canyon gaped to receive them and they went down, following the narrow, switchback trail that seemed to be leading them into the very center of the earth.

IT WAS late afternoon before they started down, and soon the shadows began to creep up the canyon walls, reaching with ghostly fingers for the vanished sunlight. Overhead the red blazed with the setting sun's reflection and seemed to be hurling arrows of flame back into the sky. The depths of the canyon seemed chill after the sun on the plateau, and Mike walked warily, always a little ahead of the horse he was leading.

Dru was riding, and when he glanced back once, she smiled brightly at him, keeping her eyes averted from the awful depths below.

Mike had no flair for making love, for his knowledge of women was slight. He wished now that he knew more of their ways, knew the things to say that would appeal to a girl.

A long time later they reached the bottom, and far away on their right they could hear the river rushing through the canyon. Mike knelt and, striking a match, he studied the trail. The tracks turned back into a long canyon that led back from the river.

He got into saddle then, his rifle across his pommel, and rode forward.

At the end, it was simple. The long chase had led to a quiet meadow, and he could smell the grass before he reached it, could hear the babble of a small stream. The canyon walls flared wide and he saw, not far away, the faint sparkle of a fire.

Dru came alongside him. "Is—that them?" she asked, low-voiced.

"It couldn't be anyone else." Her hand was on his arm and he put his own hand over it. "I've got to go up there alone, Dru. I'll have to kill him, you know."

"Yes," she said, simply, "but don't *you* be killed!"

He started to ride forward and she caught his arm.

"Mike, why have you done all this?" she asked. "She isn't your sister."

"No." He looked very serious in the vague light. "But she's yours."

He turned his head and spoke to the horse. The animal started forward.

When, shortly, he stopped the mount, he heard a sound nearby. Dru Ragan was close behind him.

"Dru," he whispered, "you've *got* to stay back! Hold my horse. I'm going up on foot."

He left her like that and walked steadily forward. Even before he got to the fire, he could see them. The girl, her head slumped over on her arms, half dead with weariness, and Ducrow bending over the fire. From time to time Ducrow glanced at the girl. Finally, he reached over and cuffed her on the head.

"Come on, get some of this coffee into you!" he growled. "This is where we stay—in Peach Meadow Canyon. Might as well give up hoping to see that sister of yours again, because you're my woman now!" He sneered. "Monson and them, they ran like scared foxes! No bottom to them. I come for a woman, and I got one!"

"Why don't you let me go?" Juliana protested. "My father will pay you well. He has lots of money."

"Your pa?" Ducrow stared at her. "I thought Voyle Ragan was your uncle?"

"He is. I mean Ben Ragan. He ranches up north of the canyon."

"North of the canyon?" Ducrow laughed. "Not unless he's a Mormon, he don't. What's he look like, this pa of yours?"

"He's a great big man, with iron-gray hair, a heavy jaw—" She stopped, staring at Ducrow. "What's the matter with you?"

Ducrow got slowly to his feet. "Your pa—Ben Ragan? A big man with gray hair, and maybe a scar on his jaw . . . That him?"

"Oh, yes! Take me to him! He'll pay you well!"

SUDDENLY, Ducrow let out a guffaw of laughter. He slapped his leg and bellowed. "Man, oh, man! Is that a good one! You're Ben Curry's daughter! Why, that old—" He sobered. "What did you call him? Ragan? Why, honey, that old man of yours is the biggest outlaw in the world! Or was until today! Well, of all the—"

"You've laughed enough, Ducrow!"

As Mike Bastian spoke, he stepped to the edge of the firelight. "You leave a tough trail, but I followed it."

Ducrow turned, half crouching, his cruel eyes glaring at Bastian.

"Roundy was right," he snarled. "You could track a snake across a flat rock! Well, now that you're here, what are you going to do?"

"That depends on you, Ducrow. You can drop your gun and I'll take you in for a trial. Or you can shoot it out."

"Drop my guns?" Ducrow chuckled. "You'd actually take me in, too! You're too soft, Bastian. You'd never make the boss man old Ben Curry was. He would never even of said aye, yes, or no. He would have seen me and gone to blasting! You got a sight to learn, youngster. Too bad you're not going to live long enough to learn it."

Ducrow lifted one hand carelessly and wiped it across the tobacco-stained stubble of his beard. His right hand swept down for his gun even as his left touched his face. His gun came up, spouting flame.

Mike Bastian palmed his gun, momentarily held it rigid, then he fired.

Ducrow winced as though he had been slugged in the chest, and then he lifted on his tiptoes. His gun came level again.

"You're—fast!" he gasped. "Devilish fast!"

He fired, and then Mike triggered his gun once more. The second shot spun Ducrow around and he fell, face-down, at the edge of the fire.

Dru came running, her rifle in her hand, but when she saw Mike still standing, she dropped the rifle and ran to him.

"Oh, Mike!" she sobbed. "I was so frightened! I thought you were killed!"

Julie started to rise, then fell headlong in a faint. Dru rushed to her side.

Mike Bastian absently thumbed shells into his gun and stared down at the fallen man. He had killed a third man. Suddenly, and profoundly, he wished with all his heart he would never have to kill another.

He holstered his weapon and, gathering up the dead man, carried him away from the fire. He would bury him here in Peach Meadow Canyon.

XI

SUNLIGHT lay upon the empty street of the settlement in Toadstool Canyon when Mike Bastian, his rifle crosswise on his saddle, rode slowly into the lower end of the town.

Beside him, sitting straight in her saddle, rode Dru Ragan. Julie had stayed at the ranch, but Dru had flatly refused. Ben Curry was her father, and she was going to him, outlaw camp or not.

If Dave Lenaker had arrived, Mike thought, he was quiet enough, for there was no sound. No horses stood at the hitch-rails, and the door of the saloon stood wide open.

Something fluttered on the ground and Mike looked at it quickly. It was a torn bit of cloth on a man's body. The man was a stranger. Dru noticed it, and her face paled.

His rifle at ready, Mike rode on, eyes shifting from side to side. A man's wrist lay in sight across a window sill, his pistol on the porch outside. There was blood on the stoop of another house.

"There's been a fight," Mike said, "and a

bad one. You'd better get set for the worst."

Dru said nothing, but her mouth held firm. At the last building, the mess hall, a man lay dead in a doorway. They rode on, then drew up at the foot of the stone steps and dismounted. Mike shoved his rifle back in the saddle scabbard and loosened his sixguns.

"Let's go!" he said.

The wide veranda was empty and still, but when he stepped into the huge living room, he stopped in amazement. Five men sat about a table playing cards.

Ben Curry's head came up and he waved at them.

"Come on in, Mike," he called. "Who's that with you? Dru, by all that's holy!"

Doc Sawyer, Roundy, Garlin and Colley were there. Garlin's head was bandaged, and Colley had one foot stretched out stiff and straight, as did Ben Curry. But all were smiling.

Dru ran to her father and fell on her knees beside him.

"Oh, Dad!" she cried. "We were so scared!"

"What happened here?" Mike demanded. "Don't sit there grinning! Did Dave Lenaker come?"

"He sure did, and what do you think?" Doc said. "It was Rigger Molina got him! Rigger got to Weaver and found out Perrin had doublecrossed him before he ever pulled the job. He discovered that Perrin had lied about the guards, so he rushed back. When he found out that Ben was crippled, and that Kerb Perrin had run out, he waited for Lenaker himself.

"He was wonderful, Mike," Doc continued. "I never saw anything like it. He paced the veranda out there like a bear in a cage, swearing and waiting for Lenaker. Muttered, 'Leave you in the lurch, will they? I'll show 'em! Leanker thinks he can gun you down because you're getting old, does he? Well, killer I may be, but I can kill him!' And he did, Mike. They shot it out in the street down there. Dave Lenaker, as slim and tall as you, and that great bear of a Molina.

"Lenaker beat him to the draw," Doc went on. "He got two bullets into the Rigger, but Molina wouldn't go down. He stood there spraddle-legged in the street and shot until both guns were empty. Lenaker kept shooting, and must have hit Molina five times, but when he went down, Rigger walked over to him and spat in his face. 'That for a double-crosser!' he said. He was magnificent!"

"They fooled me, Mike," Roundy said. "I saw trouble a-coming and figured I'd better get to old Ben. I never figured they'd slip in behind you, like they done. Then the news of Lenaker coming got me. I knew him and was afraid of him, so I figured to save Ben Curry I'd get down the road and dry-gulch Dave. Never killed a white man in my life, Mike, but I was sure aiming to! But he got by me on another trail. After Molina killed Lenaker, Dave's boys and some of them from here started after the gold they'd figured was here in this house."

"Doc here," Garlin said, "is some fighter! I didn't know he had it in him."

"Roundy, Doc, Garlin and me," Colley said, we sided Ben Curry. It was a swell scrap while it lasted. Garlin got one through his scalp, and I got two bullets in the leg. Aside form that, we came out all right."

BRIEFLY, then, Mike explained all that had transpired, how he had killed Perrin, and then had trailed Ducrow to Peach Meadow Canyon and told of the fight there.

"Where's the gang?" he demanded now. "All gone?"

"All the live ones." Ben Curry nodded grimly. There's a few won't go anywhere. Funny, the only man who ever fooled me was Rigger Molina. I never knew the man was that loyal, yet he stood by me when I was in no shape to fight Lenaker. Took that fight right off my hands. He soaked up lead like a sponge soaks water!"

Ben Curry looked quickly at Dru. "So you know you're the daughter of an outlaw? Well, I'm sorry, Dru. I never aimed for you to know. I was getting shet of this business, and planned to settle down on a ranch with your mother and live out the rest of my days plumb peaceful."

"Why don't you?" Dru demanded.

He looked up at her, his admiring eyes taking in her slim, well-rounded figure. "You reckon she'll have me?" he asked. "She

looked a sight like you when she was younger, Dru."

"Of course, she'll have you! She doesn't know—or didn't know until Julie told her. But I think she guessed. *I* knew. I saw you talking with some men once, and later heard they were outlaws, and then I began hearing about Ben Curry."

Curry looked thoughtfully from Dru to Mike.

"Is there something between you two? Or am I an old fool?"

Mike flushed, and kept his eyes away from Dru.

"He's a fine man, Dru," Doc Sawyer said. "And well educated, if I do say so who taught him all he knows."

"All he knows!" Roundy stared at Doc with contempt. "Book larning! Where would that gal be but for what I told him? How to read sign, how to foller a trail? Where would she be?"

Mike took Dru out to the veranda then.

"I can read sign, all right," he said, "but I'm no hand at reading the trail to a woman's heart. You would have to help me, Dru."

She laughed softly, and her eyes were bright as she slipped her arm through his. "Why, Mike, you've been blazing a trail over and back and up again, ever since I met you in the street at Weaver!" Suddenly, she sobered. "Mike, let's get some cattle and go back to Peach Meadow Canyon. You said you could make a better trail in, and it would be a wonderful place! Just you and I and—"

"Sure," he said, "in Peach Meadow Canyon."

Roundy craned his head toward the door, then he chuckled.

"That youngster," he said. "He may not know all the trails, but he sure gets where he's going, he sure does!"

THE HIGH COST OF KILLING

WHEN you read about all those gunmen who strutted down the streets of the old cowtowns, you wonder why the town marshals didn't just shoot hell out of them and keep things nice and quiet.

Some of these marshals, notably Wild Bill Hickock, did shoot quite a few. But for most of them it didn't work that way. The bad men shot each other or kept on living.

If you look into the story of Western America, you'll find two reasons:

First, killing a real bad man never was a cinch, even when you had the drop on him. Those tough hombres could shoot straight even while carrying a load of lead.

Second, believe it or not, the marshals were careful not to do much killing because they had to pay for burying anyone they killed.

Strangely, that was probably the most effective way of keeping some marshals, who were about as trigger-happy as the bad men, from killing too many. They just couldn't afford all those coffins!

Some students of the West are positive that Wyatt Earp, the fame town marshal of Abilene, held his fire many times because of that business of having to buy a coffin. In addition to being a brave man, fast on the draw, Earp was just a little careful with his money.

The cost of those funerals might seem puny today. The simplest job cost around fifteen dollars, while a real fancy one might cost as high as a hundred dollars. But three or four funerals, even at cut-rate prices, would ruin the budget of any town marshal whose salary was somewhere between seventy-five and a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month. So the town marshals let them live.

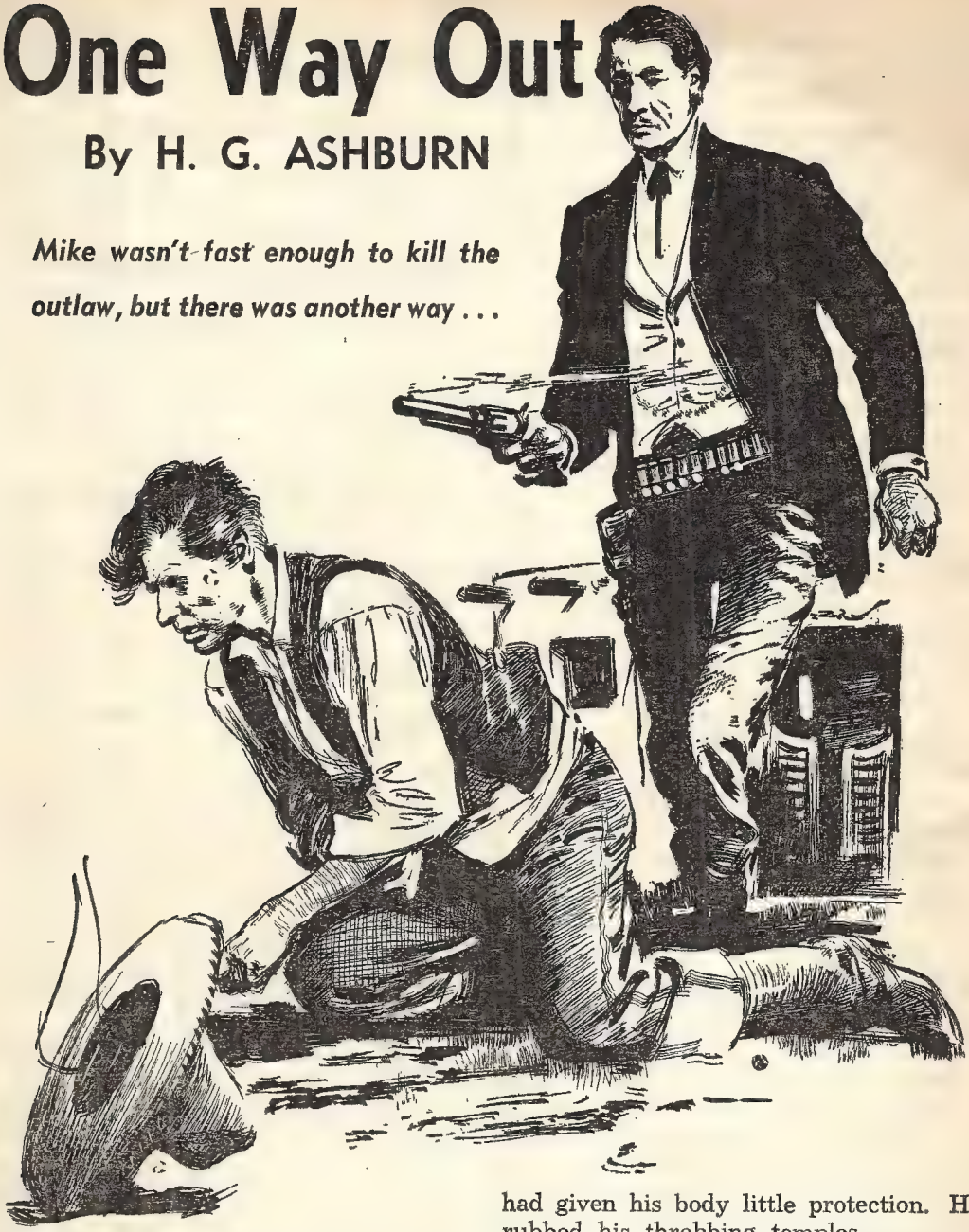
The "business men" (saloonkeepers), who cooked up the plan of making the marshals pay, sat back and smiled. They didn't lose many good customers after that.

—Jimmy V. Burnette

One Way Out

By H. G. ASHBURN

Mike wasn't fast enough to kill the outlaw, but there was another way . . .



THE morning sun lifted over the towering peaks of the Carmen Mountains, and poured warm golden rays into the plaza of the little village of San Miguel.

Mike Martinez stirred his cramped muscles. The night had been cold. His tattered clothes and threadbare serape had given his body little protection. He rubbed his throbbing temples.

"Madre de Dios!" he whispered. "What evil is in my head?"

Mike struggled to his feet and looked at his bed. He had slept where he had fallen in his drunken stupor the night before.

He took a few unsteady steps out of the narrow alley and looked upon the plaza.

The smell of the town, of its people, animals, of beans, tortillas, and burning meat assailed his nostrils. San Miguel was his own. Here he had been born and had grown to manhood. A shiver shook his body. There was a sour acid taste in his mouth. *Dios mio,* but he needed a drink. Something to warm his bones and lift the fog from his muddled head.

Across the square was the *cantina.* Mike squinted his bleary eyes to measure the distance. He cast an apprehensive glance at the office of the Prefect of Police. Mike had a carefully cultivated dislike for all law officers.

He launched himself and staggered to the squat adobe structure that was the *cantina.* It took several minutes of rattling the barred door before he realized the place was locked. He spat disgustedly into the dust and slithered down to sit propped against the post which supported the plank awning. Slowly the sun began to thaw his chilled body.

Mike watched disinterestedly as a few shopkeepers drifted into the plaza and unshuttered their places of business. A mongrel pup passed, sniffing at every post and tree trunk. When behind him Mike heard wood scraping against metal, he scrambled to his feet.

"Hola, compadre!" he greeted as the door opened and Red Thorne stood before him.

"What the devil do you want at this hour?" Thorne rasped angrily.

THE sharp words stung Mike. A fine way to talk to an old friend. One who so often had stood at Thorne's side in the face of danger and death. Was not Mike Martinez the man who had shown Thorne the secret trails across the Border when the Rangers ambushed his band of outlaws? Where were the others now?

And had not Mike led his outlaw captain to this, his own secluded village? Few knew of the town hidden in the wilds of the rugged mountains. And Mike was loyal. He had kept his lips sealed as to the true identity of Red Thorne. The outlaw was known in San Miguel as Señor Thomas, which everyone pronounced Tomás.

"One little brandy, *Señor Capitan,"* pleaded Mike. "My stomach, my head—"

"Come in and get your snoot full again," snapped Thorne. He let the door slam in Mike's face.

In his more virile days, Mike would have turned his back and walked away at this insult. But the need for the fiery stimulant was more than he could stand. His thirst was greater than his pride, and he pushed his way into the *cantina.* A half-filled bottle was standing on the bar.

He grabbed the bottle, then froze.

Over the plaza drifted the mellow tone of the heavy bronze bell in the mission tower. His eyes turned toward the century-old church dedicated to San Miguel de Arcángel.

This was Sunday morning. The thought sank into his hazy mind. As he listened to the reverberating sound he thought of his youthful days.

Old Father Carlos had been a spry young *padre* then. Mike would sit at his feet while the priest told him of his heavenly namesake. The celestial warrior became his model. Mike had become adept with weapons, but there all similiarity had ended.

The *padre* was one of the few who remembered Mike when he returned to the village. The priest had waged a relentless battle to bring him back into the church. And a futile one.

Mike's hand tightened on the slender neck of the bottle. Every fiber in his body cried out for the stimulant before him. but only yesterday he had given Father Carlos his solemn promise that he would go to confession this morning. Even now the *padre* was waiting for him.

He cringed as he thought of the long string of scarlet deeds to which he had to confess. They would surely scorch the holy man's ears.

The sound of the bell beat against his ears. His fingers loosened and slid down the smooth surface of the bottle to the bar.

In the rear he could hear Thorne splash

and snort as he performed his toilet. In a short time the outlaw appeared, a pink glow on his freshly shaven face. Thorne was a handsome man with a commanding personality. He seemed to have some inner power that reached out to control those around him.

As always, Mike felt humble in Thorne's presence. He rubbed the week-old stubble on his jaw.

"You found the bottle," said the redhead. "What's the matter now?"

"Permit me, *mi capitan,*" groveled Mike. "I would like to clean up."

"There's water and soap out in back," Thorne said carelessly. "Also a razor if you're not afraid of cutting your throat." He poured himself a shot of brandy.

Mike's mouth watered as he watched Thorne down the liquor. He clamped his jaws and retreated through the back door.

A measure of strength returned to him as he finished his ablutions. His face smarted from the scraping of the razor. As he walked through the cantina to the street this time it was easier to pass the bottle still standing on the bar.

Outside, the plaza had come to life. Red Thorne was leaning against the adobe wall of the cantina idly watching the faithful stream toward the church.

"Look at those poor fools bowing and scraping to that old hypocrite," Thorne said with a sneer.

MIKE'S gaze picked out Father Carlos. A woman was kneeling before him to receive his blessing. Behind him stood a man, holding a dressed fowl, obviously a gift for the beloved priest.

"Father Carlos is doing a better business than the cantina this morning," replied Mike, waxing bold.

"What a racket!" said Thorne. "They spill everything they do to him, then he bleeds them dry because he knows their secrets."

"Perhaps you would like the church to win like you win in the cantina," suggested Mike.

Red Thorne's eyes narrowed. He turned on his loyal subject. "You keep your mouth shut about how I won this joint," he warned. "Remember you had a hand in it, too—where the money came from."

"*Si señor,* I know," said Mike. His head bent.

"The fool who once owned it has no use for it now," said Thorne.

"No," agreed Mike. "He sleeps peacefully in the cemetery beside the church."

Mike cringed as he thought of how he had helped Thorne cheat the former proprietor of the cantina at cards. When the owner had seen what they were doing he had protested and gone for his gun. That had been a mistake. No one could outdraw Red Thorne. And Mike had sworn to the alcalde that his outlaw chief had acted in self-defense.

A carriage rolled into the plaza and a swift change came over Thorne. His face brightened and he waved to the occupants of the vehicle.

"Señorita Salazar is very beautiful," said Mike. "The black of mourning becomes her."

"Yeah, she feels bad about her brother," Thorne said carelessly, "but she'll get over it when we're married."

"Don Felipe is very old. After you are married it will not be long before you inherit all these lands, even the town itself," observed Mike. "This would not have been possible had her brother lived."

"That avalanche idea worked out just right," the outlaw chuckled. "The kid is out of the way and no questions asked."

"*Si,* it was very clever." There was little heart in Mike's voice. His part in setting the landslide which had taken the life of young Salazar weighed heavily upon him this morning. It was another sin he had to confess to the priest. There seemed to be no end to them.

Perhaps he should go back to the bottle. It would be far easier to let the liquor blot these deeds from his memory.

As a group of brown-skinned urchins swarmed into the plaza Red stepped out into the street. He cast a handful of coppers into their midst.

Howls of delight filled the air and even the staid Salazars looked around to see the

reason for the shouting.

"*Gracias, señor, gracias,*" chimed the happy children.

Red Thorne smiled.

"The señorita is pleased that you make the young ones happy," remarked Mike slyly.

"Think I'll mosey over and have a word with them," said Thorne. "I hear that black-robed fox doesn't cotton to some of my ideas about the wedding celebration."

"Father Carlos?" asked Mike.

"Yeah," Thorne said grimly. "After he's tied the knot, I'll fix his wagon—good."

The outlaw cut a fine figure in his well-tailored clothes, thought Mike, as he watched the cantina owner march toward the carriage. Thorne had a romantic dash that had made him irresistable to more than one lovely young maiden. Don Felipe and his wife greeted him warmly. Señorita Maria was all aflutter.

That gave Mike the opportunity for which he had been waiting. Hugging the buildings on the far side of the square, he made his way as unobtrusively as possible toward the church.

Yet with each step his apprehension for the coming ordeal mounted. Maybe he was a fool. When the old *padre* heard what he had to tell he might order him out of the church, excommunicate him.

Once in the midst of the throng gathered in front of the church he noted that many of the faces about him were those of friends of his youth; older now, but with the stamp of a happy life upon their countenances. Perhaps if he had not strayed, one of these plump matrons would have been his wife; some of these young men and women, his sons and daughters.

BUT no, Mike had had ambition. Life in this remote mountain village had not held enough promise for him. He'd had to go forth into the world. He had wanted to gather a huge fortune and return to become a *rico* like the Salazars. Oh yes, he'd had big plans at twenty.

At forty-six he had come crawling back to the isolated town, bringing with him his outlaw leader. A pack of Rangers in hot pursuit had hurried them across the Border.

He was glad that his parents had not lived to see his return. A sister had extended hospitality to Thorne and himself when they'd first arrived at San Miguel. But after a short time a realization of the full import of what his outlaw chief was doing here had caused Mike to avoid all his old friends. He had taken solace in strong drink. Mike well knew he had done no favor for his people by bringing Red Thorne to San Miguel.

Thorne had immediately recognized the possibilities for profit in the secluded town. It was an ideal hideaway for men of his ilk—across the Border, out of reach of blazing Ranger justice, and there were plenty of long-forgotten mountain trails for smuggling into the States. Thorne had big plans and he played a cautious, cunning game. He planned to sieze control with outward respectability. But once the town was under his thumb only Mike knew what diabolical results would follow.

Strangely enough, the outlaw's actions had never bothered him before. Certainly not in Texas that had treated him none too kindly. Here in San Miguel it was different. This was his town; these were his people.

Twice in the short three months since their return the outlaw leader had killed. Soon now he would head the great Salazar household. Don Felipe would bend to Thorne's will or he would follow his son. For a certainty Mike Martinez had brought a curse upon his homeland.

These thoughts hung like a millstone around his neck. He came to the steps of the church and hesitated. He was seeing the bottle standing on the bar at the cantina. Two or three gulps would drive these tortuous thoughts from his mind. He was tempted to turn back, but some impelling force drove him on.

He elbowed through the crowd, feeling but not seeing their faces. Then he was inside the thick adobe walls. Terror seized him until he wanted to turn and run. But

it was too late now. Father Carlos was waiting in the heavily curtained confessional. . . .

When mass was over Mike crowded into the midst of a thick knot of people until he was safely outside. He slipped around to the side of the church and picked his way toward the hills that rose abruptly behind the mission. It was a relief to be back in the good graces of his faith. Father Carlos had severed the cord which had bound the millstone to his neck. However, in its place the *padre* had left a yoke upon his shoulders.

Mike walked rapidly up the wooded slope. He wanted to be alone, to have time to think.

In one sense, Father Carlos had been easier on him than he had expected. He'd said that Heaven rejoiced when a lost sheep returned to the fold. The Lord forgave his sons, but—

And the "but" was what baffled Mike. He'd had to promise the *padre* he would do all in his power to make restitution for his sinful deeds.

En el nombre de Cristo! How was this possible?

Mike slumped to the earth and leaned against the trunk of a cedar. Could he undo the cheating of the cantina owner? Could he roll back the boulders that had taken the life of young Salazar? He was no magician.

The gold he had stolen from the foreigners in Texas had long since vanished. The saloons and gambling halls had quickly separated it from him, all except what he had given to the women who had shared his wild revels. Women! The *padre* was insane. What kind of restitution could he make for them?

Mike eased the heavy Colt that pressed against his stomach. He withdrew the weapon from the folds of his sash and looked at it. What about the men who had tasted his lead? Could he bring them back to life? Did the *padre* think he had the power of a *Jesucristo?* He threw the Colt into the dust at his feet. This state was as bad as before. There was no one to go to for help, not even Thorne.

THORNE! By bringing him to San Miguel he had brought a curse on the town. Did the *padre* think he could lead the outlaw out of town as easily as he had led him in? He didn't know Red Thorne.

Father Carlos had opened a door to Mike, but had placed an insurmountable obstacle before it. Hopelessness spread over him. There was no solution—except one. Thorne always had a bottle for him. It was his only escape from this mental torture.

Mike got to his feet and started toward the village. As one thought after another tore at his brain, his pace increased. By the time he arrived at the plaza he was running.

The plaza was teaming with idle people, lounging in the sun, exchanging gossip. Mike pushed on through the throng as rapidly as possible. Once he almost collided with the Prefect of Police. After that he became more cautious.

The *cantina* was full of people. Red Thorne was behind the bar.

"Just the hombre I've been looking for," Red said crisply. "Come around in back."

"Por favor, Señor Capitan," gasped Mike, "a drink!"

Red Thorne stamped out the back door. Mike followed.

"The *padre* left you dry," snarled the outlaw coldly. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing, *mi capitan,*" answered Mike. "I thirst—one little drink."

"Maria saw you come out of the box," charged Thorne. "You tipped off that old fox—"

"No, señor, I speak only of my faults. He is forbidden—"

"Forbidden!" The outlaw snorted in disgust. "You're going to pot, Mike. I can't take any more chances with you." Thorne's tone cut like a knife.

Mike watched a cold light dance in the outlaw chief's eyes. He had seen that look before. A chilling fear climbed up his spine. He backed away from Thorne.

Suddenly a new thought flashed into his mind. A glimmer of hope sparked through the black despair. There was one chance to combat the tortures that plagued him.

He had promised the *padre* he would do all in his power to make restitution for his misdeeds. At last he'd found one thing he could do. He could stop this outlaw and save his own people from the evil that Thorne was about to inflict upon them. A smile lifted the corners of his lips. He took another step back.

"You drunken slob!" growled Thorne. "Think you can outdraw me?"

The outlaw knew Mike carried a Colt in the folds of the sash around his waist. But he didn't know the pressure of the heavy weapon was missing now. Mike crouched forward, trembling slightly. He must act quickly before the outlaw changed his mind.

Thorne's face twisted and his hand arched over the butt of the gun. It was close now . . .

A sense of peacefulness came to Mike's mind. The craving for drink was forgotten. For the first time since he could remember he felt that he was doing something of which he could be proud. His lips moved in silent prayer. The Prefect must be made to listen closely. He must hear Thorne's shot. Mike clutched at his sash with his right hand.

Thorne's gun thundered. A stab of pain tore at Mike's chest. He felt himself spin with the heavy slug, then his knees crumpled and he was clawing the dust. Again the outlaw's gun barked and this time numbness drove away the pain. He could taste a salty warmness in his throat.

"Gracias, Señor Capitan," Mike mumbled, smiling.

A chorus of voices was shouting around him. Their faces were close but the sound was retreating. Now he could see the Prefect.

"He tried to kill me!" shouted Thorne, as the Prefect took the smoking weapon. "He went loco when I wouldn't give him brandy."

Mike closed his eyes. Would Thorne argue his way out of this? No—that must not be.

"Look in the top of his pants," cried Thorne. "You'll find his gun there. I beat him to the draw."

"I find nothing, señor," replied the Prefect.

Mike breathed thankfully. He opened his eyes. Father Carlos was bending over him. He tried to speak but his lips would not move. It didn't matter. The happiness in his heart was good. Nothing else counted now.

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The stirring true story of Midnight, the horse that couldn't be rode

King Of The Buckers

by Bill Barker

BRONC BUSTER Eddie Woods, hunkered in the dust of the rodeo arena at Cheyenne, Wyoming, stared dazedly at the big black horse that had just dumped him. A pickup rider reached down a rescuing hand to him. Eddie grabbed it and pulled himself gingerly erect.

"You okay, son?" asked the pickup man with professional solicitude.

"Yeah, I'm okay," mumbled Eddie. "Except for losin' some skin off my—elbow, along with the seat of my pants, I'm fine! But hell, I ain't complaining. When that Midnight horse takes to climbing the sky and reaching for the moon, a mortal man just hasn't got a chance!"

A Short Ten Seconds

Eddie Woods said it all in one mouthful. Acknowledged all-time champion of rodeo broncs, Midnight had never been ridden

under standard rodeo rules. Several riders claimed to have topped him for more than the required ten seconds, but they had been "riding slick," cowboy style. Modern rodeo rules state explicitly that a "rider must stay in the saddle ten seconds, using only one rein. The single rein cannot be knotted or wrapped around the wrist, and the rider must ride with one hand in the air and cannot change hands on the rein. The rider must also come out of the chute raking his horse on the shoulders with his spurs, and must then shift and rake his flanks. A rider is disqualified if thrown, if he pulls leather (grabs the saddle-horn), or if he blows (loses) a stirrup."

Judged by these rigid rules, Midnight never had been ridden. Fred Studnicka, one of the big black's alleged conquerors, declined to accept a challenge for $10,000 a side to ride Midnight according to the rodeo rules. Studnicka had been the recipient of a "home-town" decision at Pendleton, Oregon, in 1932. Manhandled in the starting chute, Midnight had taken three seconds to start bucking. In three jumps he piled his man, but the timing judge fired his pistol as Studnicka sailed off into space. Unprejudiced spectators declared that this was undoubtedly the shortest "ten-second" ride in rodeo history.

The Boss Eats Grass

Midnight was foaled on Jim McNab's Cottonwood ranch in southern Alberta in 1915. When Jim came home from World War One in 1919, the husky black stood over fifteen hands high and weighed close to 1300 pounds. Foaled of a thoroughbred dam and a Morgan-Percheron sire, he had never felt a saddle or bridle in all his four years of life. Sensing impending disaster in the powerful black, the ranch hands had waited for the boss to come home and do the dirty work of breaking him. McNab, an expert rider, was leery, too. He worked up to the job by breaking all the other young horses on the ranch first. Finally the moment arrived.

Two cowboys cut the colt out from the other youngsters in the horse pasture and hazed him into the corral. Here the boys managed to rope him and hold him still long enough to rig a blindfold and clap a saddle and bridle on him.

Snubbed fast, Midnight stood braced and quivering as Jim approached him. The boss tossed away his half-smoked cigarette and grinned wryly at the cowhand holding the black colt's bridle.

"Here we go, Hank. If I don't make this trip, plant me under the big pine up on the hill. Nice and quiet up there!"

"Yeah, boss, we sure will!" blurted Hank, who was more spooked than McNab.

Jim McNab thrust a booted toe in the stirrup and swung easily to the cyclone deck. As his butt touched the saddle, he could feel Midnight shudder beneath his weight and tense his great muscles—"like a grizzly winding up to bust you wide open," as McNab reported later. McNab settled himself firmly in saddle and nodded okay. The boys jerked the blindfold and turned Midnight loose.

The black exploded rocket-like through the open corral gate into the pasture beyond and went to work. Bogging his nose between his forelegs, Midnight did his damndest to stand on his head and kick a hole in the sky with his hind feet at the same time. Used to that trick, McNab leaned back on a taut rein and waited calmly for the next move. Unconsciously, he was braced for an orthodox spin or swap-ends maneuver—but Midnight was not orthodox. Suddenly he threw his great head upward, leaving his rider clinging foolishly to a slack rein. Before he could take in the slack for a fresh grip, Midnight flashed into a dizzy power-spin —and Jim McNab hit the sod.

Inwardly burning but outwardly cool, he got to his feet. "Put him back in the corral," he said quietly.

The boys skedaddled with their catch ropes, and in fifteen minutes Midnight was snubbed up in the corral ready to go another round with his owner. This time the black went into a series of terrific sun-

fishes, winding up with the classic walking-beam, straight ahead, pitch. Again caught offguard by the lightning switch in tactics, McNab ate grass for the second time. This time the boss got mad.

"Get the black devil in there!" he bawled. The sweating ranch hands jumped to obey.

The World's Top Bucker

After his third quick flop, McNab sat on the ground awhile and thought things over. Hank cautiously joined him and ranchhand and boss rolled cigarettes. Silently they watched while the wrangler and his crew rounded up Midnight a fourth time, snagged him with ropes from both sides, and held him steady while they jerked the saddle and bridle off him.

"Looks like we got ourselves a bucking horse, Boss," ventured Hank finally.

McNab grunted. "Looks like be damned! We've got the top bucking horse in the whole wide world. Right now he knows more tricks and packs more power than any horse I ever rode. Man, he's *murder!*"

McNab was as right as four aces in a row, but still he was in no hurry to prove Midnight a champion. With gentleness and patience, he even got to ride the big black occasionally. Also, he got a kick out of letting all and sundry take their crack at topping Midnight. From miles around the ranchhands came, most to look and admire, a few to try their luck at riding "the Midnight horse." Their luck was always rotten; Midnight piled them all without working up a lather.

Typical of his victims was Twenty-one Johnson. Twenty-one was a shrewd gent whose racket was riding wild horses for a suitable wager and then investing his profits in sky-limit blackjack games. Johnson had a gimmick—he used a saddle with an eighteen-inch swell. When he pressed his powerful thighs against that broad swell, no horse that lived could shake him loose. Anyhow, that's what Twenty-one boasted—and he backed his claim with fifty dollars.

The result was sad for Twenty-one. Midnight gave him his head-stand, moon-kicking treatment, snapped without pause into his walking-beam act, used three fast spins and a break-neck sunfish to finish up. Poor Johnson woke up on the ground after McNab had poured two buckets over his bleeding face to bring him out of slumberland.

Spurs Make An Outlaw

After that slick exhibition, Jim decided to give Midnight a whirl with the best riders in Canada. Starting in easy, he signed the big black up for the bucking horse events in the local stampede at Macleod. Midnight was sensational at Macleod, quickly dumping both riders who got him in the draw. One man lasted four seconds, the other two. The two-second victim rashly gouged the big horse with his spurs—the first Midnight had ever felt driven home in deadly earnest. Previously, his fleeting contests with man had been a game with the big black—you had only to see the look in his eye and the rakish slant of his ears to know he enjoyed it. But something dark and bitter boiled up in Midnight the moment those spurs burned into his flanks. Screaming his rage, he threw his rider so hard the groggy bronc-peeler had to be helped from the arena and required medical attention.

Overnight, Midnight became an outlaw—a man hater. Taken back to the ranch at the close of the MacLeod Stampede, he refused to let McNab mount him or even pet him. The old friendship between horse and owner was finished, and Jim McNab went about his work on the ranch with a strange, desolate feeling under his vest. He grew grim and surly, and the ranchhands exchanged significant glances at the change in the usually smiling boss.

"Acts like he's lost a brother, instead of that old black hellion," lamented Curly Walters at chow one night in the bunkhouse. The boys agreed gloomily. Instead of the happy outfit it had always been, the Cottonwood became a spread to be avoid-

ed by men looking for a job or riding the grubline. Tension mounted, the boss cussed out two of the newer hands, and both boys drew their time and moved on.

A new situation aggravated McNab at this time. Ace riders of the big Red Deer outfit had heard of the wonder horse, and they issued a challenge asking that McNab enter Midnight in the Calgary Stampede so they could get a crack at him and win some decent prize money at the same time. McNab curtly refused the challenge. The Red Deer riders tried again, hinting bluntly that maybe McNab was afraid to risk the big black against top rodeo bronc-busters. McNab blew up at that. He entered Midnight at Calgary and caustically invited the cocky Red Deer riders to come and take their licking.

Winner—and Champion

Yet Jim McNab was a miserable man as he sat in the stands on Opening Day of the Calgary Stampede, waiting for the announcer to call his horse. Remorse stabbed him with a rankling barb, and he cursed himself for the hot Irish pride that had tricked him into entering Midnight in the Stampede. He had an Irishman's doleful premonition that today's doings would lose him his "black beauty" forever. He shivered, as at a banchee's touch, in his front-row seat.

Red Deer's top hand drew Midnight first. The lithe cowboy mounted with grinning confidence. The signal sounded, the chute gate opened, and Midnight came out of there head down and hooves smoking. The rider whooped, and raked the big black across the shoulders with his spurs. Midnight opened his big mouth and bawled his fury, stood straight up on his hind legs and madly churned the air with his front feet.

Once, twice, three times the black giant bucked, leaping high each time and slamming back to earth with a whip-snapping shock that brought the blood dripping from his rider's nostrils. A fourth Titanic jump—and Midnight catapulted his rider to the ground like a pebble snapped from a slingshot. The cowboy hit the dirt face first with a sickening thud, rolled over on his back and sprawled there, limp and motionless.

Midnight came down stiff-legged, whirled, and nuzzled the fallen rider while the roaring stands went silent in hushed horror. Then, with the pickup men rushing in to rescue the fallen rider, the big horse raised his head and stepped carefully across the unconscious human. Docilely he submitted to being led off the field.

In the stands, the spectators leaped to their feet in a spontaneous burst of thundereous applause. Jim McNab did not applaud. Big Jim sat with his head in his hands, his thick shoulders shaking with emotion.

Six days the Stampede lasted, and during those six days Midnight easily tossed each rider daring enough to tackle him. Upon his final victory, he was acclaimed championin bucking horse of Western Canada.

Back on the home range, Jim McNab tried almost desperately to reestablish his old friendly relationship with Midnight. No dice. The horse ignored him. Once only, Jim essayed to mount him. Midnight threw him—quickly and hard.

Well, that was that. McNab quit trying to make up with Midnight; he knew at last it was hopeless. Keeping him around the ranch where he could see him every day was like rubbing salt in an open wound. So, after having owned Midnight for ten years, McNab sold him to Calgary promoter, Pete Welch. The delighted Welch promptly took his new star on a gala tour of Canada, along with his top-notch troupe of rodeo horses and riders. Midnight thrilled the cash customers at the Edmonton Jubilee that season of 1925 by dumping four of the best riders in the country in world's record time.

He Hates Spurs

Within two years, Midnight added the bucking championship of the United States to his Canadian title. He won the

unofficial but generally recognized crown by throwing Bobby Askins, of Montana, before 20,000 screeching fans at the Toronto Exhibition Grounds. Bobby, usually an astute operator who played all the angles, made the grave tactical error of spurring the champ hard instead of faking it. He paid for his mistake in blood and teeth.

Verne Elliott and Ed McCarty, American rodeo operators and old-time riders, bought Midnight in 1927 for a reported measly $250. They promptly insured him for $5,000, and within three years of brilliant campaigning were to refuse an offer of $10,000 for the horse. From the moment of his American debut at the Fort Worth Rodeo in 1928, the gleaming black Canadian star was a tremendous drawing card in the United States.

Pete Knight, one of the top rodeo riders of all time, was Midnight's most persistent challenger. Pete risked his neck aboard the ebony demon at Vancouver, Pendleton, Cheyenne, Columbus and Fort Worth. Knight's best time in any of these bouts was seven and one-half seconds at Cheyenne. Pete, along with Eddie Woods and many another defeated contestant, authored a classic comment about Midnight. Asked by a newspaper reporter what was the best thing to do when riding the champion bucker, Pete spat disgustedly past the inquisitive scribe's ear and drawled, "Start praying, son, start praying!"

Perhaps the best crack ever made about Midnight, and certainly the funniest, was one originating with an ordinary run-of-the-show rider who had no business tackling the wonder horse in the first place. This nervy little guy ate dust on Midnight's first jump out of the chute, and he sat there on the ground watching the champ buck circles around him just for the hell of it. Kicking high and handsome, Midnight caught a hind hoof momentarily in a swinging stirrup.

Instantly his deposed rider yelled to a pickup man, "See *that?* I got *off* when I seen *he* wanted to get *on!*"

Midnight Passes

Midnight hit the big-time rodeo circuit year after year; from Calgary, Pendleton and Cheyenne to Salt Lake City and Fort Worth, and east to Madison Square Garden in New York. His owners retired him after the 1933 Cheyenne Frontier Days show. The champion bowed out of competition undefeated by throwing his old opponents, Bobby Askins and Turk Greenough. Bob and Turk drank together after the show, toasting Midnight round by round until the bottle of rye was just about killed.

At that point, Turk started to cry and soon both hard-bitten rodeo boys were bawling like babies.

"Ain't going to be the same no more, without that old black devil to fight every season," sobbed Turk.

"You're dadgum right, *compadre,*" wept Bobby. "Now we got nothin' but l'il old billy-goat horses to ride."

Midnight made his last public appearance in 1934, when, in response to numerous requests, he was taken to England and displayed in four exhibition rides at Wimbledon. After that triumphal trip abroad, Elliott and McCarty took him home to America and turned him out to pasture on Verne Elliott's ranch near Johnstown, Colorado. There he died on November 5, 1936, at the ripe old equine age of twenty-one, and there his body lies buried today.

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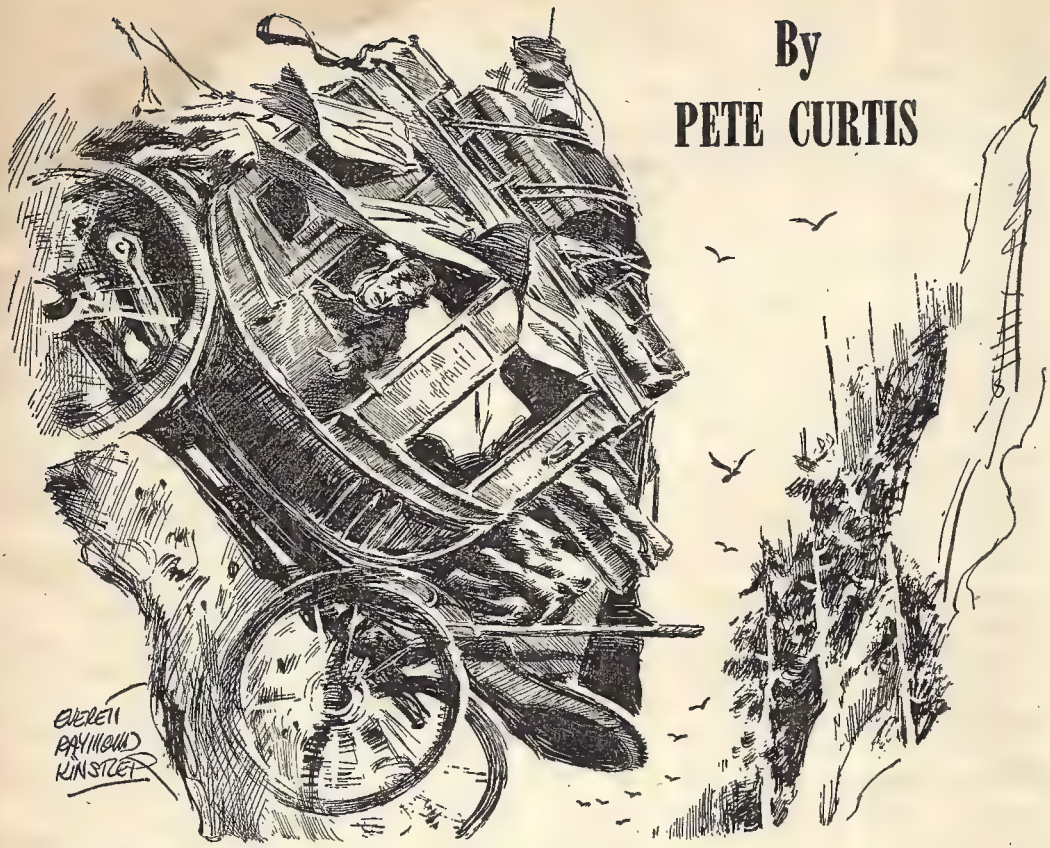

By
PETE CURTIS

The Devil Held The Reins

CLAUDE RIMBAUGH'S right hand hurt. There was a dull ache and a heavy, somewhat numb feeling all through it. The bones along the back were especially aggravating. He rubbed the hand constantly.

Not so long ago a Colt .45 had been shot out of the hand, and though he had retrieved the gun and now had it leathered at his side, it was useless to him. The slug that had caromed off it had jammed the cylinder and hammer.

Rimbaugh was crouched warily in the darker shadow of a board fence. He was a wanted man, an outlaw on the dodge, and right now he was wanted bad.

It seemed as though every man in and around Coldwater from miles was looking for him. Armed men patrolled the roads and trails leading out of town. Soft-footed men eased along the cross streets and down night-black alleys. Houses, outbuildings, even darkened stores, any place in which a man could hide, were being checked and searched. And a horse was extremely hard to come by —for Claude Rimbaugh.

His own pony had been shot out from under him on Main Street, when he had made

Claude Rimbaugh needed a horse but couldn't quite steal one, and what seemed the next best thing was really the worst

his attempt at escape. Earlier he had been in the Coldwater Saloon, a stranger in town enjoying whisky and a stud poker game, feeling safe enough.

Yet all the while he had been scrutinized closely by a gentleman who had turned out to be a deputy sheriff. The man had approached him, finally, and requested his presence at the jail office, to check his identification.

Rimbaugh had jerked his gun and shot the man in the belly—without hesitation, and with as much feeling as a wolf chewing the heart out of a lost lamb; as cold-bloodedly as when he had shot a rancher in the back for the pay-roll money the man carried; as viciously and inhumanly as the time in Texas when he had slashed a Mexican's throat and ravaged the man's sweet and pretty wife.

RIMBAUGH had been able to fork leather before any of the stunned customers in the Coldwater Saloon could impede his getaway. His pony had just picked up momentum when a wild and angry gunshot had felled the horse.

Claude himself had come out of the dust with gun smoking. Frantic return fire peppered his way, and one of those slugs had kicked the .45 out of his hand. He'd scooped up the fallen weapon with his left hand, tried unsuccessfully to fire it, then had ducked and run to beat hell. And he'd made it; slinking swiftly and blindly between buildings, running crouched for the thick shadows cast by sheds, hiding behind piled rubble at the rear of stores.

Yet each time he had made his bid to leave town, he had come dangerously close to being flushed out because of the thinning cover near the outskirts; therefore each time he had been forced to retreat into the center of the town again.

Now he was hunkered behind this warped fence, taking a blow, to ease the raw burning in his lungs and throat. And he rubbed his aching hand mechanically, listening for bootfalls, for soft-speaking voices.

The fence was only temporary haven, he knew. Soon this entire back area would be probed thoroughly. Possibly it had been searched already, and would be again and again. Men would stalk through Coldwater town in crazy-quilt pattern until he was caught, or the search given up as a failure.

Rimbaugh's dully aching right hand caressed the gunbutt that angled out from his hip. Helpless rage flowed through him for the moment, and when his jerky breathing quieted down the black fear in his belly was like an insidious leech draining his energy, his chances for freedom. The stray bullet slapping his gun that way, jamming it, leaving him without teeth, but not without his wild urge to kill—

With the blood-lust roaring in his head, with half a chance he could break his way out of this trap; and he could cut down some of these scum at the same time. But without a gun, boxed in the way he was, that was no more than wishful thinking.

The nagging thought of capture started him creeping through the shadows again. The muted voices of searching men, calling back and forth, came to him after he'd gone only a short distance. The voices faded, and Rimbaugh heard only the smallest of vagrant sounds in the restless night.

He slinked on through the shadows, and fetched up near the entrance of a musty-smelling barn. The black cavern of the archway was inviting, yet it was not a good place to hide. Every nook of a place like this would be searched.

There was a slim chance, though, if the barn sheltered horses, that the animals might have been overlooked in the stringent rounding up and guarding of horseflesh. As he eased swiftly into the deeper black something loomed directly ahead on the runway. Eyes straining, he made out the indistinct angles of a vehicle—judged it to be a Concord stagecoach. Another coach was at the rear.

That meant that this was the stage company's barn, and the knowledge gave Claude Rimbaugh a sliver of further hope, for he felt there was a definite chance of horses being penned nearby.

He slipped beyond the coaches and ferreted into each stall, but all of them were empty. He blew out a gusty oath. His teeth gritted as he catfooted toward the front of the barn. Would horses be corralled outside? And if so, would they be guarded? Without a doubt

they would be, but maybe by only one man—one man with guns. Play it right, Rimbaugh thought, and maybe I'll have me a horse *and* weapons. Sneak out there and take a look-see.

Even as the thought came his boots froze to the runway, as the faint murmur of voices reached him. He listened, rigid and motionless; the voices swelled louder.

Rimbaugh's tight-drawn lips worked with silent curses.

HE STOOD abreast of the first coach, and thought of the interior as a hiding place. His hand stabbed out and groped for the door handle. Yet he quickly threw the idea away. They'd poke into the coaches, for sure. He fell back uncertainly to the last coach and stood behind it, hardly drawing a breath, his heart kicking his ribs.

If only his gun wasn't damaged! His belly quaked when he again thought of how helpless he was without a gun.

Those men, talking, continued to draw nearer. Their heels made soft thumping sounds on the earth now.

Rimbaugh breathed desperately, They're sure as hell coming in here!

He could not stay where he was and not be caught. He had to duck somewhere, had to conceal himself! His mind raced and reached for a hiding place. Yet he could not think of a place—no place at all in the barn—where they would not quickly uncover him. The stalls or the hay loft were much too obvious.

The new idea struck him like a slap in the face. The boot—the rear luggage boot of the coach! One hand rested on it, nudging the cover used to protect luggage and mail and which had not been rolled up at the end of the last run!

That had to be it. There was no time, now, for anything else.

He climbed hurriedly onto the boot, yet kept his movements easy and careful so as not to send creaks and groans to listening ears outside. He worked quickly with the

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hanging cover, trying to give it a casual drape, then doubled all the way forward, on his knees and forearms, as compactly as he could get.

Quite soon he could make out what the men were saying to each other. Two men, he judged, evidently just outside the entrance now. At least, only two men were talking. He sensed when they moved inside, then the pitch dark of the barn was lifted when a lantern was lighted. Luckily, heavy shadows smothered the rear boot of the second coach where Rimbaugh crouched.

He heard a deep voice say, "Deputy Flagg's wife is taking his killing party hard. Gone all to pieces, I hear."

"Yeah. Her with a little girl left on her hands, too. Hope they chouse out that murderer and hang him fast!"

"Most likely he's clean out of the county by now," was the reply. "He's had time enough to get a long ways from here."

"Did you ever see a more cold-blooded killing? Just jerks his iron and shoots Flagg down like he was no more than a mad dog."

"He's a mean one, all right."

A lull came to their palaver, and when they next spoke, their voices seemed a trifle more muffled. They were no longer speaking of Rimbaugh's killing of the deputy, and he only half listened to the import of their conversation.

A man to whom they referred as Henry had been forced to give up the Coldwater Stage Company, it seemed, because of overburdening debts. Road agents had plagued the line, and a Prairie City man named George Tolman had wangled the mail contract away from this Henry and had also taken over the ownership of the coaches. Henry would have lost the coaches anyway, but the mail contract . . .

Dirty politics was one man's opinion, expressed heatedly. Both considered this Tolman a no-good, slippery snake. Headquarters of the new stage line was to be in Prairie City.

One of the men said something then which caused Rimbaugh to listen with the strictest attention:

"I sure wish Sheriff Jamie would get here and give us the high sign to wheel out. I'd like to be in Prairie City by sunup, and get Henry's nags back to him by sundown tomorrow. Can't see the sense in holding us up. We're not going to let that killer climb aboard."

THE other voice asked, "Which one goes?"

"The fore coach there. The other one makes a last passenger run 'tween here and City, then Tolman gets it."

"Damn shame. Old Henry's a mighty fine man to work for."

"None better, Mike. Hate to see him lose out to a gent who's as squirmy as a snake's backbone."

"Them's my sentiments too, Barney. Hell, I been meaning to say it before, but I don't reckon as how I want to work for Tolman, after all. Figure to mosey north. Maybe tie on with Wells Fargo."

"Say, you're talking real smart, mister. You know, Mike, I figure you and me is a lot alike when it comes to how we think and feel. Yes sir, Mike, I been dreaming up hair-brained schemes this night . . . Listen to me, boy . . ."

For some reason their voices lowered, or they'd moved further out, and Rimbaugh caught only snatches of the ensuing conversation—"Black Canyon run . . . Miller's . . . Wild Horse Gorge."

His mind was not on their powwow, anyway. All that was drumming through his head was the knowledge that the forward coach would be hauled out of this burg some time tonight, and without passengers. Was that his break? Maybe—maybe. If he wasn't rooted out before the stage departed. The worst moment would come when this Sheriff Jamie showed up. The lawman would make sure the barn was completely searched before he allowed either coach to roll.

On the tail of his thoughts he heard new voices, the scufflings of a number of men. One voice, rough and authoritative, whipped through the barn as it shouted an order to somebody farther along the street.

Rimbaugh's tongue nervously wet his lips. He dragged in a deep, slow breath, his nerves wire-tight as he listened. He heard someone ask:

"Sheriff, you going to let us run that stage out now?"

"Soon as we make sure the killer's not in here. Once you're rolling, Barney, keep your eyes peeled. Don't let him sneak aboard."

A pause then, bridged by murmuring talk, then the sheriff's command, "Two of you boys go up to the loft. Sift through that hay up there."

Bootsteps passed, and the glow of a lantern strongly washed Rimbaugh's hiding place, then swiftly dimness fell again as the men clumped on along the runway.

The sheriff's gruff tones sounded from the rear of the vehicles this time:

"Joe, make sure he's not in them coaches."

Rimbaugh's muscles gathered, knot-hard. This was the bad moment.

A door of the forward stage clicked softly and, after a brief interval, swung shut again.

Rimbaugh felt the vibration of the second coach when one of its doors was opened.

"He's not in the coaches, Sheriff." The voice was startlingly loud to Rimbaugh.

"All right. Help us search these stalls back there."

The coach shimmied when the door was slammed shut.

Rimbaugh held his breath. He expected the cover to be jerked back. He was aware of the diffused lantern light outside the cover. He heard the shuffling walk of the man, footsteps fading back into the barn.

Rimbaugh's breath came out in a long, blowing exhale. He had started to sweat bad under the heavy cover.

The search seemed to drag on endlessly. In his tight, balled-up position, his muscles got stiff and painful, and his joints ached dully. A dry hoarseness was in his throat, but he fought down the urge to clear it, instead swallowing repeatedly.

And finally the searchers passed his hiding place again; their lanterns glowing, dimming outside the cover. With each man's nearing footsteps, he held himself in fearful suspense, waiting for the cover to be flung back.

Again he heard the sheriff's voice from in front of the coaches.

"You and Mike can take that stage out now, Barney. Joe, you park yourself here. I don't want that killer sneaking in after we leave."

[Turn page]

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RIMBAUGH'S heart pounded from a different kind of tension and excitement as he heard them move away. A fierce happiness spread through him at not being discovered; a sardonic regard for the men who had missed him.

At last he could hear nothing but the harsh hollowness of his own breathing. He figured the sheriff's man was alone, while the two stage company men probably had gone after a span of horses.

Gingerly he raised to a hand and knee position, unlimbering his muscles and joints with squirmy motions. He slipped down off the boot, crouched, and peered out past the coaches.

By the light of a lantern, hanging from a spike, just inside the archway, he saw the sheriff's man standing outside with his back to the barn.

Rimbaugh moved swiftly to the front coach and opened the door. With light-bodied movements he climbed in, brought the door to quietly and dropped to the floor of the vehicle.

He didn't think the sheriff's man had heard him, but he couldn't be sure, and he waited in coil-muscled uncertainty for long moments. Slowly relaxing then, a cold, humorless smile stretched his lips.

He heard horses being brought around heard the stomping echoes of the hooves on the runway as the team was backed to the coach. In minutes they rolled out, the two men on the driver's seat shouting their farewells to the sheriff's man.

Claude Rimbaugh bade farewell to Coldwater, too, although silent, disdainfully, almost deliriously. There was an urge in him to roar with laughter. These men searching for him were fools!

The wind swirled through the coach and loosened his muscles, seeming to drive out all the hot, pent-up tension; and the dark night was his comforting blanket.

The cumbersome vehicle lurched and swayed on its braces, and the driver's ringing yells at the team bounded back into the coach. Only once did they slow appreciably—when they were accosted by a group of riders near the edge of town.

Rimbaugh heard the driver shout that the stage already had been searched by the sheriff. They were allowed to pass without coming to a full halt.

Rimbaugh's lips peeled back from his yellowed teeth in a slippery, malicious grin.

The stage bucked on through the night. Now and then fragments of talk between the two men on the box came back to Rimbaugh. He paid no heed. As time lengthened, the floor of the coach began to rub its hardness into his bones and the rushing night air to chill him.

He finally pulled himself onto the forward seat, leaned back luxuriously and folded his arms across his chest. And all the while the smirking, self-complacent grin shaped his usually bitter-set mouth.

He'd have no trouble with the two jockeys on the box. They wouldn't know his gun did not work when he stuck it in their faces and relieved them of their own weapons. Or he could drop off the stage somewhere along the route, maybe on the outskirts of Prairie City. He wasn't sure, yet, what he was going to do. He wasn't worried about it. When the time came, he'd make his play. Maybe he'd even kill the driver and his pardner with their own guns, and ride out of this territory on one of the stage horses. With those two dead, his chances for a clean fade-out would be just that much better.

Thoroughly satisfied with himself and his situation now, he allowed drowsiness to creep through his reclining frame. During the long, winding climb out of Black Canyon he napped frequently, his chin on his chest, his head bobbing to the pitches of the coach. The air was sharper with the ascension into the tablelands and he gradually withdrew into himself.

Wakefulness deserted him completely for a spell.

IT WAS the driver's shout, while pulling the team to a stop, that brought him out of it, Startled, he immediately rolled forward and hunkered on the floor.

Had they stopped at a relay station? He was puzzled and surprised. Damnation! Had he been asleep long?

The team was being unhitched, he could ascertain. So they *were* at a relay station,

and he had almost slept through a change of teams! He grinned ruefully. He was getting a little too careless, too assured.

A strident shout from one of the men tensed him. "Jack her, Mike! Here go the brakes!"

Rimbaugh felt the coach lurch forward. What the hell were they doing? That was a mighty quick hitch-up.

The stage was rolling again, for sure—rolling downhill now.

More shouts, wild and jubilant, broke out behind him.

"Let 'er ride! Yahoo!"

"Yi-e-e-e! There goes one stage Tolman don't get!"

The abrupt speed of the coach struck a new fear into Claude Rimbaugh. The meaning of the shouts took hold chillingly in his mind, shocking every fiber of his being.

The stage was rolling driverless and without a team!

Wild Horse Gorge—the turbulent, dangerous Wild Horse River coursed through that gorge. Those loco stage-coach jockeys were sending this stage to hell!

He had to get out . . . Already he was feeling powerless in the wildly pitching coach. His whole body vibrated and bounced from the crescendo of a terrific jolting force. *He had to get out!*

He lunged in frenzy for one of the doors. The stage lurched violently, tilting crazily awry, and Rimbaugh's head cracked sharply against the door panel. He floundered to the floor in a loose-muscled heap. His will and strength suddenly were gone. Yet the jarring sensations hammered through to his senses. It was the panic inside him which would not be beaten down.

Struggling mightily to gain purchase, his face a grimacing mask of rigid horror, he fought to reach outside for the coach's door handle.

And then his belly seemed driven up into his brain.

All the paralyzing fears of life were his in that brief space of time. The stage-coach was plummeting straight down—down into a black, black abyss!

Rimbaugh's terrified scream echoed through the night.

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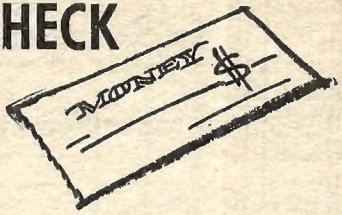

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MANY American Indian tribes taught their children how to ride by tying them to the backs of horses. Looks like they must have got a little confused, or were fresh out of horses, when they came to the great Sitting Bull.

* * * * *

Clifford Waits of Austin, Texas, is a gun-chaser—one of the few left. This does not mean he goes tearing about the landscape in hot pursuit of firearms. It means simply that he puts fancy designs on the shooting irons of them that wants 'em.

* * * * *

Henry Thomas Page, better known as "Old Pancake," discovered the greatest bonanza of all time, the Comstock lode, from which $340,000,000 was taken, and later committed suicide because he was starving. And we complain about the price of food today!

* * * * *

Montana permitted buffalo hunting on the open range in 1953 for the first time in 69 years. What won't they think of next?

* * * * *

The State of Idaho's name comes from Indian words meaning "light on the mountains." And speaking of Indian names, the Comanches used to call the twisting, turning San Antonio River the equivalent of "Drunken Man Going Home at Night." And just to point up how times have changed, there's a curvy highway in Korea that our Army boys over there call "Marilyn Monroe Road." Ah, the great strides civilization has made . . .

* * * * *

The eyesight of some American Indians is twice as keen as that of the white man. The white man can see only six stars of the plecades, whereas some Indians can see as many as thirteen. We claim it all depends on how hard a man gets banged on the old bean.

* * * * *

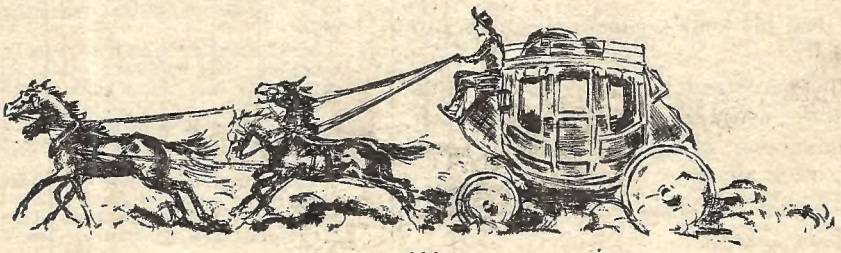
Buffalo Bill once owned a newspaper. Together with his sister he ran the Duluth press. An odd fact about the paper was that every working journalist on the paper was a woman. Maybe ol' Buffalo wasn't such a man's man as he made out to be.

* * * * *

A Shorthorn cow at a ranch in Fairview, Montana, gave birth to quintuplet calves—a feat described by veterinarians as "one in a million." We'll take their word for it.

* * * * *

William MacLeod Raine, one of the most celebrated Western writers, was born in London. So, one never knows, does one.



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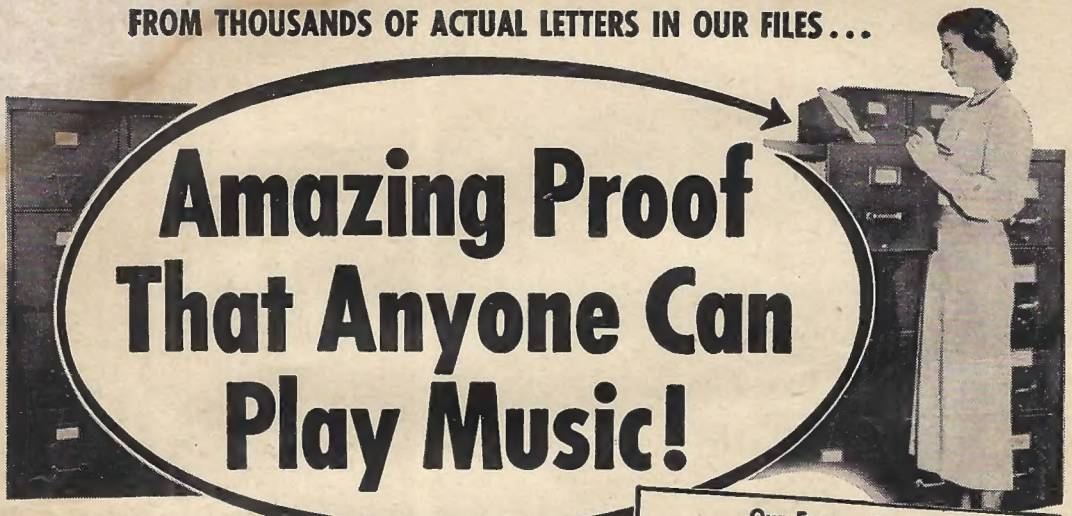

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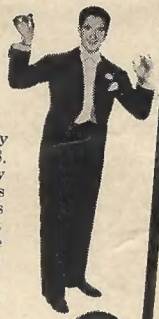

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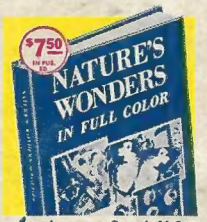

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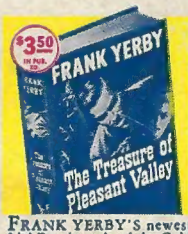

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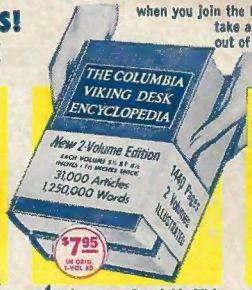

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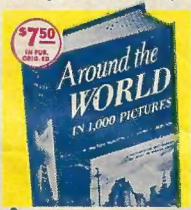

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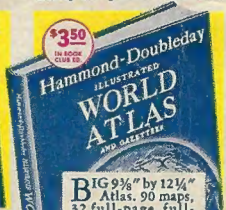

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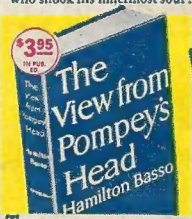

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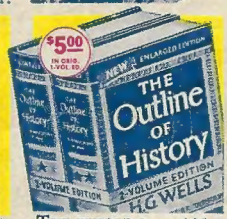

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